Toasted Buns

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Toasted Buns

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Summary

After seeing Tony naked and tanned -- all over -- in a decontamination shower, Steve realizes he may be in trouble. Tony, meanwhile, is *definitely* in trouble over those tabloid pictures of him sunbathing nude. The solution is clearly a tropical island getaway.

Notes

Scifigrl47 had an idea. Copperbadge agreed to collude. This was probably a long series of poor life decisions. Including our working title, which we can't seem to top, so we left it as is.

The story is nearly complete so we decided to post a teaser first chapter. More to come eventually!

Chapter 1

“Will you stop being so damn stubborn and just get naked?”

“I would make some comment about your sudden desire for my young, nubile body, but I am too damn exhausted.”

Steve gave Tony a look. “Thank heavens for small mercies,” he said, and Tony laughed. It was high and sharp and a little hysterical, but it was definitely a real laugh. “Come on. Decontamination. Now.” He already had his shirt off, the various layers of body armor and under armor, and, naked to the waist, he went to work on the fastenings of his boots.

“I'm telling you, the suit-”

“I will take that suit off of you in about thirty seconds,” Steve said, his voice calm. “With, or without your help, Mr. Stark.” He glanced up, his hair flopping in his eyes, and he shoved it back with a battered hand. “If you'd like to avoid a real long bout of repairs, you'll handle it for yourself.”

Tony was leaning against the wall, his head hanging forward, his hands loose at his sides. “Might be worth it,” he admitted, lifting one hand to fumble at the latches of the suit. “Even though I don't think it's necessary. This thing has environmental seals that allow me to go into space. You know that, right?”

“I'm aware of all its bells and whistles,” Steve agreed, tossing his boots into the decontamination pile. He wasn't sure if the SHIELD staff would be able to get them clean, but at this point, he'd be just as happy never to see them again. Even the annoyance of breaking in a new pair of boots would be worth never having to smell any of this again.

He was getting mighty sick of things trying to swallow them. It never ended well for them, or the thing trying to do the swallowing.

“So I don't-”

“Drop your drawers, Stark, and get in the damn shower.”

Tony laughed. “Kinky, Captain.” But he was tossing pieces of the suit aside, stripping off various pieces and tossing them on the pile with Steve's uniform. In a matter of minutes, he was down to the black undersuit and his boots and gauntlets. Steve looked away. There was something oddly intimate about that, about the fragments of the suit and the skin tight mesh suit.

He unbuckled his belt and tossed it aside before going to work on his pants. “You going, or am I carrying you, Tony?”

“Fine, fine,” Tony said, walking past him, all golden brown skin and an easy smirk. “I woulda thought you'd be a bit more modest than this, to be honest.”

Steve's eyes rolled up, hard enough to risk hurting something, probably his sense of decency or fair play. “You do realize I've been through basic training, don't you?” he asked, amused. “The US Army isn't really big on preserving modesty, Tony.” He sealed the door of the decontamination unit, and triggered it with a slap of his palm on the button.

The super powered jets of hot water hit from all directions, and Tony let out a yelp. Grinning, Steve snagged a cloth from the bin and started scrubbing.

“There is a difference between being naked with a drill sergeant screaming in your face.,” Tony said, his tone arch, “and being naked with me. Being with me changes things.” He leaned in, his head tipping in Steve's direction. His dark hair was tumbled in his face, his lashes in damp clumps, his grin slightly manic. He wiggled his eyebrows. “I make things so much better, Cap.”

Steve stared at him, and then dropped the washcloth over Tony's head. “Less sass, more suds,” he said, deadpan, and Tony laughed.

“We're still alive,” he said, scraping the cloth off of his head with one hand. He dumped a healthy measure of soap over his head. “And my stylist is going to kill me if she finds out what I'm doing to my hair right now. She is a violent lady and she owns like fifty pairs of scissors. I survived attack by semi-sentient goo blob, and now I will be murdered by a very angry woman.”

“Maybe you ought to tip a bit better,” Steve said, scrubbing his hair with both hands. He rinsed it and started over, enjoying the heat of the water.

“I tip exceptionally well, I know better than to stiff the woman who can easily make me look like an idiot for the next couple of months,” Tony said. He tipped his head back and soaped up his face.

“Tony, that's every woman in your life, you do realize that, don't you?”

“Yes, but some of them are more well armed than others and have less fucks to give. Pepper and Natasha have something to gain by keeping me alive, at least short term. Paula, meanwhile, has nothing to lose except a steady customer and stands to gain a much better behaved client base,” Tony said. “It's a legitimate concern, Cap.”

He glanced over, about to say something smart, when he was caught by the sight in front of him.

Being naked with Tony was a bit different. Steve stared, uncomprehending, as Tony shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his hands in his hair, working up a good mass of bubbles. The lines of his back, his shoulders, his hips, his arms, his legs, were all familiar, but now, there was nothing between him and Tony but the water that ran heavily over his skin. As Tony arched his back, every muscle pulling tight with the motion, Steve's eyes followed the ripple of his skin.

That's when he realized that Tony's ass had no tan line.

Steve's head snapped around, tearing his gaze away, but it was too late. Now that the thought was in his head, there was no way that he could get rid of it. He glanced back, a quick darting little look, ashamed of himself for doing it, but unable to stop. There was no doubt about it, the golden tan of Tony's shoulders and back, his arms and legs, extended over the tight lines of his ass.

And Steve had a sudden, overwhelming vision of Tony sprawled out naked in the sunshine, unashamed and unconcerned. Of all that skin on display, warm and relaxed, maybe even risking a quick catnap under the summer sun.

“Cap?”

Steve's head snapped up, sucking in a breath a little too fast and getting a mouthful of water. He choked on it, his brain snapping away from thoughts that had turned very quickly and very inappropriately to the nearly pornographic.

“Hey, hey, whoa!” Tony's hand landed on his shoulder, and Steve jolted, turning his head away, his head and his body, because yes, adrenaline and worry and hot water and thoughts that he should not be having about his teammate had rather obvious effects. “Cap?”

“Sorry,” Steve managed, coughing again to clear his throat. “That went the wrong way.”

“Yeah, don't think the serum helps you breathe water, but what do I know?” Tony backed off, but now he was staying close, casting worried looks in Steve's direction. “Everyone else's okay, right?”

“We were the last. Everyone else got tossed in decontamination before we cleared the scene,” Steve agreed, trying to focus on scrubbing himself down. His hands rubbed over his arms, feeling the muscles bunch beneath the skin with each pass. “Bruce and Clint first, Thor got a brief pass, probably didn't need it, but he didn't object.” He gave Tony a look. “Some people don't fuss as much as you.”

“Speaking of fussing, when did Na-”

“Apparently, she came slamming in just after Clint and Bruce got started and simply stripped under the showers,” Steve said, and Tony burst out laughing.

“Of course she did. That woman does not have time for anyone's shit,” Tony said, and there was affection in his voice. “Poor Bruce.”

“I'm guessing he was too tired to do more than hand her a bar of soap,” Steve said. Which was a state he desperately wanted to be in.

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By the time they got out of the shower, through the antibacterial spray, past the medical screening, and into the little makeshift antechamber where they could dress, Tony was shivering. He'd spent far too long far too damp, and the heating in this part of Stark Tower left something to be desired. Then again, warmth bred bacteria. Balancing human comfort

against decontamination protocol was always difficult, and Tony wasn't usually concerned with comfort until he lacked it.

At least they'd been able to get home first. SHIELD's mobile decontamination trailers were an affront to the dignity of man.

He pulled on a pair of paper-thin underwear, fingers shaking, back to Steve so that it wouldn't be evident, and also because Steve was acting a little weird. Jumpy. Not like Cap, even after a fight -- usually he was eerily calm, almost passive once the shouting was over. But then, almost getting eaten could make anyone a little nervous.

Something warm draped itself over his shoulders, and Tony let out a small whimper of relief.

"You missed the blankets," Steve said, voice amused. Tony pulled the blanket tighter around himself, huddling down into it. "Ready to go?"

"I want brandy," Tony said, as they stepped into the elevator that would take them up to the Avengers' common floor. "That's what you give people who've had a shock, right?"

"Yeah, if you're skiing the Alps," Steve replied.

"That would be significantly more fun," Tony said. "Wait, no, I don't want brandy. I want whiskey. In coffee."

Steve sighed. "Should I bother trying to get you to drink something that will actually hydrate you?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"Cocoa," Steve said. "You do not need caffeine and none of us need a caffeinated you right now."

"That's just mean," Tony replied.

"Cocoa."

"With whiskey."

"I measure the whiskey."

Tony sighed as the elevator stopped. The doors opened on what looked, at least to Tony, a little like heaven.

Bruce and Natasha were on the couch, mostly dressed but also wrapped in blankets. Clint was draped over Bruce, who did tend to run hot after de-Hulking, and Thor was in a nest of pillows at their feet. There was a Tony-sized space between Natasha and Bruce.

Clint looked at him and obligingly lifted his feet off the otherwise-empty cushion. Tony dove for it.

"You said you'd make the cocoa!" he called over his shoulder. He landed in the middle of the heap of Avengers just in time to see Steve smile tolerantly.

"I'm making drinks," he said, knotting the blanket around his waist like a towel. Or, given his physique, an oversized loincloth on a Greek statue. "Hands up for cocoa."

Everyone but Bruce raised their hand.

"Hands up for Irish cocoa."

Tony raised his other hand. Natasha kept hers up. Thor looked perplexed. Tony leaned over and murmured "Booze" in his ear. Thor raised his other hand too.

"All right. Make a hole for me when I get back, or I'm drinking it all myself," Steve said.

Natasha scooted away from Tony, towards the arm of the sofa, and Clint curled himself up into a ball on top of Bruce, who was, Tony noticed, actually asleep. He slid closer, huddling up against Bruce as well.

Steve returned quickly enough that he'd probably caved to efficiency and used the microwave to heat the milk; he seemed to hesitate for a second when he saw the empty space between Tony and Natasha, but then he settled in and handed around the mugs he'd prepared. Tony cleared one hand out of the blanket, grasped his mug, and drank deeply while Steve settled in. He was even warmer than Bruce. But he was also sitting stiffly, as if he was either wounded or uncomfortable.

"Hey, Cap," Tony said, quietly, so as not to wake Bruce. "Seriously, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"We got checked out," Steve reminded him.

"Well, if you're bleeding internally -- "

"I'm not bleeding internally, Tony."

Tony looked up at him. His jaw was set, a muscle twitching in it, and his neck was tense. Tony passed his mug to his other hand and raised newly-warmed fingers up to the nape of Steve's neck, pushing in gently. Steve sighed quietly but he didn't brush Tony off, so Tony sipped from his mug and casually kept kneading, working out one little knot in his neck and then a larger, lower one on his shoulder.

"This time last week I was in Louisiana," Tony said conversationally. "It was like a million degrees, it was *great*. Jazz, jambalaya. Tons of sun."

Steve tensed briefly, but Tony pushed his thumb into the gap between two vertebrae, and his shoulders dropped like strings had been cut.

"I thought you were at a conference," Clint said.

"And as keynote speaker it was widely understood that I knew more than everyone else and could skip other peoples' panels without consequence," Tony replied.

"You did seem pretty tanned for someone spending a weekend inside with other nerds," Natasha said.

"Engineers. Not nerds. Very cool engineers. Obviously, or I wouldn't hang out with them," Tony corrected, pressing himself harder into Steve's side so that he could get a little leverage against the base of his skull. Steve sighed again, then leaned forward, apparently surrendering.

Natasha gave Tony a raised eyebrow over Steve's back, but Tony ignored whatever weird thing she was trying to say with her face and dug his knuckles into Steve's scalp. Steve had very fair skin -- his back was smooth and unblemished, probably the Serum's work, though there was a sprinkling of freckles over his pale shoulders. Tony ruffled the hair at the back of his head, patted his neck, and let his hand rest on the bumps of Steve's spine.

Tony was warm now, squeezed in between several other people, including Thor (who was dozing against his knee, keeping his feet warm). Whatever Steve was freaking out about appeared to have passed. Plus he had a mug full of alcoholic chocolate, and when Natasha saw he'd drained his, she poured half of hers into it as well.

Eventually Steve leaned back and closed his eyes, breath deepening. Tony brought his hand down, cuddling deeper into his blanket, and fell asleep with his nose pressed into Steve's bicep.

*

Steve stumbled back into consciousness with an ease that usually eluded him. More often than not, he snapped awake, shaking off sleep in the blink of an eye. If he was lucky, he didn’t have fragments of dreams and a sense of loss chasing him back into the waking world.

Now, however, he found himself inhabiting that languid, comfortable place between sleep and wakefulness, warm and somehow peaceful. He shifted, wondering why he wasn’t lying down, how he’d managed to fall asleep sitting up. And what the warm weight across his chest was.

The room was dark and warm, the only light coming from the fire that someone had started in the hearth. He would’ve blamed Thor, but he suspected that Jarvis was taking care of all of them. Thor was snoring on the floor, a low rumble of sound that was almost comforting. Clint’s snoring was a static rumble, and Steve was glad that his face was mostly buried in the back of the couch.

His eyes opened slowly, not particularly eager to abandon this warm, comfortable place in which he found himself. He took a deep breath, and something tickled his nose, soft, damp spikes of hair. Steve blinked, sleep fading now, to find that Tony was sprawled halfway across his chest, his face buried in Steve’s neck. Judging by the fall of copper curls on his other shoulder, Natasha was on his other side, but his body was curled towards and around Tony’s.

It wasn't the first time he'd woken up in the middle of a pile of his teammates; the Commandos had ended up a lot of places where there was no protection from the elements and supplies were always short, even for them. On cold nights, Steve had surrendered his coat to someone else. Cold didn't bother him much anymore, and the serum kept his body temperature high. It hadn't taken long for the others to figure out that sleeping next to Steve was the easiest way to stave off a chill. Once Buck had made it clear that Steve owed him some body heat from an entire childhood of huddling against his back, everyone had just drawn lots as to who got to use Steve as a pillow that night.

Steve didn't mind over much, it was kind of comforting to have everyone close.

Except now his arm was around Tony's shoulders, and Tony's face was buried in his throat, the prickle of his goatee on Steve's skin making his breath hitch. Steve tried to shift, and that just made it worse, with Tony's arm around his waist, his body angled along the length of Steve's side. His breathing was soft and warm and every time he inhaled or exhaled, Tony's lips moved against Steve's neck.

That was when he remembered what he was wearing, or rather, not wearing.

Tony's skin was warm under the palm of his hands, under the twitch of his fingers. Every time he moved, breathing or muttering under his breath or just twitching in his sleep, his bare skin slid against Steve's, and Steve's brain was awash in the sensation. It was so close to a few dreams he'd had that he wondered if he was still asleep.

And if so, why his brain was determined to kill him this way.

He wondered if he could get up without waking either Tony or Nat, and he was pretty sure that wasn't happening. Even if he could slip out of Tony's arms, he knew enough about Natasha's reflexes to know that she would be awake before he could even get his feet properly on the floor.

He leaned his head back and sucked in a breath, trying to calm down his almost painful erection. His eyes closed, he started writing after action reports in his head, considered replaying a baseball game or two, maybe one of the Dodger's more embarrassing defeats would do it. There were certainly enough to choose from.

But the moment his eyes were closed, all he could think about was the warm expanse of Tony's skin. He wondered if Tony spent every vacation naked. If his winter vacations (okay, he shouldn't have brought up skiing in the Alps, he really should not have) involved sprawling out in front of the fire with a bottle of something very potent and without stitch on.

Steve was breathing slowly now, slow and deep, sinking into something that he could almost convince himself was not a fantasy. But he could see it, easily enough. He could see the slight smirk on Tony's lips as he lounged in front of the fire, a warm toddy in his hand, his eyes half closed. That golden skin gilded by the flicker of the flames, his dark hair falling over his forehead as he relaxed back against a pillow.

Steve wondered if Tony just liked hanging around naked, or if he did it because he didn't bother with clothes, or if he did it because there was someone there with him, someone that

Tony enjoyed teasing with those long, graceful fingers and dark eyes. The idea was depressing, but not nearly depressing enough.

Tony chose that moment to shift in his sleep, stretching up and rearranging himself against Steve's chest. Steve's breath froze in his lungs, and Tony's head slipped from the crook of his neck. He had a moment of relief, tempered by a shameful sort of disappointment, before Tony cuddled down again, the prickly expanse of his jaw scraping across Steve's nipple.

His whole body jolted, arching straight off of the couch at the stimulation.

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Tony woke with a startle as the pillow under his face moved, and for a moment he had a vivid flashback to one of the more nonsensical nightmares of his childhood -- *the pillow is a giant cockroach!* -- before he sat up straight on the couch, backwards into Bruce.

"Nrrwha?" he managed, looking around, wide-eyed, heart thumping. Steve was panting, one fist gathered in the blanket over his legs, the other rigid against the back of the couch.

"Cap?" Tony asked. Natasha, on his other side, was awake but wary, silent and still. Bruce must have been exhausted, because he hadn't moved even when Tony slammed into him.

Steve lifted his arm off the back of the couch, rubbing his face. Tony could see gooseflesh on his skin. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Dream?" Natasha asked. She looked alarmed.

"Yeah," Steve repeated. He visibly got his breathing under control. "I uh. Huh."

Tony adjusted the blanket around his shoulders, tilting his head. Steve didn't respond well to questions, sometimes, but silence often made him talk.

"This is nice," Steve said instead, "but we should be in bed. Our beds. Individually."

Natasha's face was brilliant. Tony grinned.

"I'm going to -- bed," Steve finished, and he stood up, a little awkwardly, holding the blanket where it was knotted at his waist...

Oh.

Oho.

Not the bad kind of dream, then, just an awkward one to have around your coworkers. Of course, that kind of thing was probably bound to happen if you were a young super-soldier surrounded by attractive people who were accidentally sleeping on your chest. He wondered idly how active Steve's sex drive was. He knew Steve's actual sex life...wasn't.

Then he stopped wondering, because that was faintly inappropriate and something he'd been avoiding thinking about, successfully, for some time.

"Yeah," he said, poker-faced, because there was no reason to make Steve feel awkward about it. He levered himself off the couch, tugging on Clint's ankle to wake him up too. "Real beds, kids. Jarvis, dim the barbecue."

The fire in the hearth dimmed down but didn't fade completely. Trying to wake up Thor when he was asleep was pointless, and waking Bruce suddenly wasn't advised in the Care And Feeding Of Bruce Banner manual, so they might as well keep the room warm for them. Tony reluctantly tossed his blanket over Bruce, hitching up the cheap disposable post-decontam underwear, and ignored the low, teasing whistle from Natasha.

Well, he might have put a little strut in his walk as he went to the bedroom he'd moved into when he and Pepper called it quits (she deserved to keep the penthouse, he wasn't going to argue). But it was half strut and half hustle, because a warm bed sounded really good.

"Goodnight, Tony," he heard Steve say, and he held up a hand in acknowledgement as he darted into his bedroom and shucked his underwear, sliding under the electric blanket Jarvis must have fired up earlier.

"Jarvis, note," Tony said.

"Shall I file it under *irrational mumbling* or *drunken good ideas*?"

"Ugh, you pain in my ass. Note: Steve seems tense. When I wake up, remind me to do something thoughtful to help him settle down a little. Also, come up with something thoughtful for me to do."

"I shall begin brainstorming at once, sir."

"And wake me whenever someone starts cooking breakfast."

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“Eggs?”

Steve glanced over his shoulder. “Some sorta eggs,” he said, smiling. Tony had made it to the kitchen, but he wasn’t sure how. He was pretty sure Tony’s eyes weren’t open, and he seemed be following his nose towards the coffee pot. Steve caught his shoulder and turned him away from the stove.

“Some sorta eggs?” Tony repeated, leaning against the counter. He was smiling, sleepy and amused.

“Well, they started out as fried eggs,” Steve admitted. He poked at them with his spatula. “Closer to scrambled now.” He shrugged, giving Tony a wry smile. “It’s eggs, sorry, I can’t promise more than that.”

Tony pried one eye open, blinking at Steve in an owlish sort of manner. “I’m not picky,” he said, scratching idly at his stomach. His shirt rose up with the movement, exposing a strip of tan skin low on his belly. He yawned. “Eggs and cooked. That, that sounds damn good right about now.”

The coffee machine beeped, and Tony made a sound that would've counted as obscene coming out of anyone else that Steve knew. Hell, it probably counted as obscene coming out of Tony, too, but he was doing his best not to think like that.

His dreams last night had taken on a distinctly carnal edge, and he didn't need additional ammunition.

"I need a vacation," Tony mumbled into his coffee.

Steve arched an eyebrow in Tony's direction. "You just got back from a vacation," he pointed out, unable to stifle a smile. Tony sounded so adorably disgruntled.

"That was business."

"Got a mighty fine tan for a man who was there on business," Steve said, stirring the eggs. "Plus, you admitted that you ditched every event that wasn't directly about you."

Tony wandered over, hovering just behind Steve's back, peering over his shoulder. "You say that like it's a bad thing," he said.

Steve did his best not to tense up, but Tony was so close now that Steve could swear he could feel his body heat. "Pretty sure that is a bad thing, Stark," he said. He waved the spatula at the counter. "Hand me a plate, would ya?"

Tony stepped back, only a couple of feet, but enough for Steve to take a deep breath without worrying that he'd end up bumping into Tony. When Tony handed him a plate, he kept his body angled out a bit, just enough to keep Tony at bay. Tony leaned against the counter as Steve plated some of the eggs. "I consider it conservation of energy," Tony said. He took the plate that Steve offered him, and paused, a smile creasing his face as he considered his arm. "It is a nice tan, though, isn't it?"

Steve's shoulders tensed. "It reeks of indolence," he agreed. He absolutely was not going to think about Tony's ass. That would be a bad choice, in the middle of the joint kitchen.

"I'm fine with this, it's got 'idol' right in there," Tony said, smirking at him. He dug in a drawer, coming up with a fork. He dug in, still leaning against the counter.

"You would," Steve said, smiling. "We have a table, you know. Chairs and everything."

"Waiting for you," Tony mumbled around his eggs. "Like a good host." He reached out with his fork, poking Steve in the bicep. "You're tense."

Steve dumped the rest of the eggs on his plate. "Some of us don't get to go sunbathing in Louisiana," Steve pointed out. "Some of us have a job to do."

"What does that have to do with being tense?" Tony asked, padding after him as Steve went to the table. There was something endearing about his bare feet and his tangled hair, and Steve shook his head. Tony dropped his plate with a clatter, and Steve stopped, halfway into his seat. Tony pointed his fork in Steve's direction. "I got it," he crowed. "Jarvis, delete the note from last night, I've figured this out, you are useless and I do not need your help."

“I am ecstatic to hear it, sir,” Jarvis said.

Steve studied the fork that was hovering around his pectorals. “I’d ask,” he mused, “but I’m fairly certain I don’t want to know.” He leaned over, digging into his food.

“Let’s take a day,” Tony said. Abandoning his plate and the table, he stalked back to the coffee pot. “Let’s take a day and just relax. Sunbathe by the pool, we can sip drinks with little umbrellas and sticks of fruit in ‘em and nap and do a lap or two if we end up feeling particularly energetic.”

Steve froze, eggs going cold in his mouth. For a moment, he forgot how to breathe. But Tony was staring at him, his face alight, his mouth turned up in a manic smile, and Steve could just see him, bare and unconcerned, sprawled out on one of those complicated deck chairs beside the Tower’s pool.

It took him a couple of tries to swallow his eggs. “I don’t think-” he started, and Tony made a face.

“Stop thinking, that’s your problem right there, Cap, there is no-” He poured coffee, waving the pot around between his words. “Don’t think. Just imagine.” He strolled back. “Plush Egyptian cotton towels, warm water, sun through the skylights, pina coladas strong enough to send a horse to rehab.” He took a sip. “Have something tropical catered, add a fire pit or something, we can take a damn day.”

Steve stared at him, trying not to think about how good that sounded. He opened his mouth, ready to object again, but it was hard. It was hard to turn down something he actually wanted. He was doing it so often now, keeping everything under control, keeping everything under wraps.

And how bad could this be? Here, in the tower, with the whole team?

Tony tipped his face forward, his big dark eyes pleading. “Come on, Cap,” he said, his voice dropping to a coaxing tone, all spun sugar and dark promise. “For me?”

Steve knew he shouldn’t do this. Shouldn’t even allow himself this much. But at this point, it was put Tony off with a simple agreement, or start imagining him naked and wandering around the kitchen.

“Fine,” he said, and it was grudging, it was disgruntled, and Tony grinned anyway.

“This,” he said, leaning back in his chair, “is going to be great.”

Steve was pretty sure he was doomed. He went back to his eggs. As a last meal, it left something to be desired.

Chapter 2

Tony was enjoying his eggs, and the idea of spending a whole day poolside with booze and Steve, and he was especially enjoying his coffee, when Jarvis said, "Sir, you have a call from Ms. Potts."

Tony groaned.

"I thought my calendar was clear!" he said. "You said I had no meetings today."

"You do not. However, I suggest you take the call. She seems...urgent."

"Pepper's always urgent. Okay, fine," Tony sighed. "Where's my phone."

"In your pocket, sir."

"Smartass," Tony grumbled, reaching into the pocket of his pajamas. "Yeah, Pep, please don't tell me there's an emergency."

"I need you to leave the state," Pepper said.

Tony blinked. "Come again?"

"I need you, for the sake of my stomach lining and my sanity, to disappear."

"Did I kill someone and not realize it?" Tony asked. Steve, across the table, looked alarmed. Tony made a *Please, as if I wouldn't remember that* gesture that may have been misinterpreted, to judge by Steve's increasing alarm.

"Do not look at any magazines today."

"Done," Tony said promptly.

"Or the internet."

"Well, that's just crazy talk."

"Your little escapade on the hotel rooftop got snapped," Pepper said, and Tony's stomach did the little dip that it always, always did when he was fucking up in public again. Didn't matter how many times he'd done it or how casually he played it off; for just a moment, and especially now that he was trying not to do it, he had that fleeting sensation of guilt and regret.

Even if, this time, he hadn't really done anything.

"Which, exactly?" he said.

Pepper's voice took on an official tone that meant she was quoting. "*Iron Man Stripped: Tony Stark Bares It All For Mystery Date In Big Easy.* There's no actual nudity in the photos, but it's pretty implicit."

"Dammit. What did they do, hire some kind of stealth jet?"

"I don't know, Tony," she said. "But for the love of God, get out of town, you know what happens next."

"Feeding frenzy," Tony sighed. "Got it. I'm so sorry, Pep, I swear..."

"Don't worry about it. You've done worse," she pointed out.

"Well, thanks."

"Sorry, I just mean, you know, I would love to spend a Saturday at a spa instead of doing damage control, but I knew what the job was when I took it on."

"I owe you."

"Already taken care of."

"Manolos?" he asked.

"Nope, handbag this time."

"Whatever keeps you happy. Okay, I'm gonna take care of this. Text you this afternoon," he said, and hung up, pocketing the phone.

"Bad news?" Steve asked, pushing the remains of his eggs around his plate.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Pool day cancelled?"

Steve looked almost hopeful, but Tony tried not to take it personally. Probably he was just not comfortable with a whole day of hedonism, however good it might be for him.

Tony tapped his phone against his lips thoughtfully while Steve finished his eggs. Pepper had just said she wanted him out of New York, which made a reasonable amount of sense. Reporters would always descend. But she didn't say anything about where he should go, or who he should take with him.

"Nope," he said. "Just a slight change of plans." He slugged down the rest of his coffee. "You done?"

"Yeah," Steve said, cautiously. "Why?"

"Come on. Quick jaunt in the quinjet," Tony said, standing up.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Chop chop. Come as you are," Tony added, and grabbed Steve by the arm. Trying to haul Steve Rogers around was reasonably pointless in the sense that Steve didn't move unless he was damn well ready to move, but on the other hand, he tended to follow obligingly if you didn't give him time to think about where he was going.

"We're in our pajamas," Steve pointed out.

"It'll be fast, I promise," Tony said.

"So fast we don't need pants?"

"Where we're going, we don't need pants," Tony intoned, and then turned his head, checking to see if Steve had caught the reference. He was smiling, so probably.

Jarvis had the quinjet fired up by the time they reached the hangar Tony had installed below the landing pad (at great expense and sacrificing his own executive office to do so, not that he'd ever used it). Steve took the copilot's seat and watched bemusedly as Tony raced through pre-flight and liftoff. Tony concentrated on navigating until they were out of Manhattan, and Steve watched the sky as he always did.

Clint had asked Steve once if he was nervous about the quinjet after -- "You know, the last time..." -- and Steve had just laughed.

"No. No Stark engineering ever failed me the way that thing did," he'd replied, and Tony had preened a little. He wasn't on great terms with the old man but at least he was upholding the legacy.

The point was, aside from troop transports, Steve hadn't flown much. He just...liked watching the sky scroll past.

"Hey, Tony?" Steve said, about twenty minutes after they left Brooklyn in the metaphorical rearview mirror. "Where exactly are we going?"

Tony looked at him, startled. "Did I not tell you that?"

"No," Steve said, lips twitching. "No, you did not tell me."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yes, Tony, I'm very sure."

"Huh. I should have had more coffee," Tony reflected.

"Tony."

"Yes?"

"Destination?" Steve prompted.

"Oh. Uh. Pepper, uh, there was a PR thing..." Tony trailed off. He hadn't really thought this through. "Pepper said I should get out of New York for the weekend."

"For the weekend," Steve said.

"Yeah."

"Are we -- are you kidnapping me?" Steve asked.

"No, I don't think -- it's not kidnapping, you came willingly," Tony pointed out. "I am not kidnapping you. I am...transporting you. To. Isla Aquaclara."

"And where is Isla Aquaclara?" Steve asked.

"It's not far, it's like, an hour by quinjet -- " Tony broke off when he saw Steve's look. "It's a private island. In international waters. Technically it's near Florida."

"And you know this because?" Steve said.

"Oh! I own it. There's a villa."

"The whole island?"

"What good is half an island? Anyway, nobody knows I own it, nobody's untangled the shell corporations yet. Did I mention the villa? Walk straight from bed to beach. Pretty sure it's stocked with food. Well, I mean, it will be. Someone'll stock it up."

"Being stocked as we speak, sir," Jarvis put in. "Would you prefer to retain the services of the caretaker as cook for the weekend?"

"No. Strict privacy," Tony said.

"Very well, sir," Jarvis replied.

There was silence, which was a little unexpected. Tony risked a glance at Steve. He hadn't meant to spring it on him, he genuinely thought he'd told him what was going on, but looking back, Steve had agreed to a pool party, not a private vacation to an uninhabited island.

Oops.

Steve was looking at him with an indecipherable expression. Tony risked a smile.

"I promise I make really great margaritas," he offered.

Steve's face stayed incredibly still for another five seconds or so, and then he broke down into laughter. Tony grinned and turned back to the controls.

"You are a crazy son of a bitch," Steve said.

"Language, *Captain America!*"

"Yeah, yeah. Cripes, Tony, you're gonna make me spend a weekend in my pajamas."

"Oh, no, there's clothes at the villa. Well. They might be a little short on you, but the swim trunks should be okay. Besides, what point clothing, if there's nobody around? Just remember sunscreen and you'll be fine."

Steve sighed. "Only you, Stark."

"Well, naturally. I wouldn't want to be unoriginal."

***

He had no idea how this had happened.

Okay, he knew how this had happened, it was Tony, Tony happened and Steve was underwater, because that's what happened to him when Tony happened. He wasn't even making sense in his own head. He had no idea how he'd gotten to this point in his existence, oh, yes, he did, once again, Tony. Tony was how-

Steve decided to stop this particular line of thought before he started crying or yelling or both.

"You own an island," he said, because stating the obvious was apparently all he could manage at this point.

"I own an island," Tony said. He sounded proud of that. Steve supposed he had reason. Sure, they were just standing on the airstrip, but he was pretty sure this counted as a very nice island.

Especially one owned by a single person.

"How does one end up owning an island?" Steve asked. Because he was standing on an airstrip in his pajama pants and a t-shirt with a hole in the armpit and his most comfortable, battered pair of shoes. He was pretty sure he should be dressed better for a private island.

Of course, the owner of the private island wasn't dressed much better, so he guessed he wasn't violating any particular dress code.

"I'd tell you, but I honestly don't remember how this came about," Tony admitted. "I'm gonna guess that there was a tax shelter involved. Or maybe a poker game." He caught a glimpse of the look on Steve's face and shrugged. "I'm not good at these things, Cap."

"Clearly," Steve said, and he should not be smiling, but he couldn't quite help it. It was Tony. Tony made sense, even when he didn't.

"Let's hit the beach!" Tony said, pumping a hand in the air.

Steve caught his shoulder and gently steered him back towards the path that lead upwards. "I am not going to the beach in my pajamas," he said. "There are limits to what I'm willing to deal with, Stark, and I think that's one of the lines I have to draw."

Tony grinned at him, dark eyes glinting boyishly. “That’s fine, just go naked,” he said, and Steve felt his face heat.

“I am-” He jerked his head away, and that was a mistake, because there was nothing but the tropical landscape, stretching out in all directions. It was all golden sand and perfect blue sky, and the breeze swept over him, carrying the tang of sea salt along with it. It was early, but it was already warm, the sun heating his skin.

And he could so easily imagine Tony, naked and sleepy and warm, sprawled out on the sands, that same wicked, teasing grin lighting his face.

“I shouldn’t have done this,” he said, and he was already turning on his foot, heading for the quinjet.

Tony grabbed his arm. “I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes still full of laughter. “I’m sorry, Steve, I’m sorry, that was a-” He grinned at Steve. “C’mon, I’ll tone down the teasing, just-” He waved a hand at the scenery. “Just a day. A day or two. Look, I-” He let out a sigh. “Look, there might have been a tiny scandal, there might be just the smallest little thing in the papers, and Pep thought I should make myself scarce, because you know what happens when someone shoves a microphone in my face, Cap, it doesn’t end well.”

“What happened?” Steve asked, ignoring the rest of it, because he would never admit it, but he kind of liked the things that came out of Tony’s mouth when he was provoked.

“Someone might’ve gotten a shot of me naked,” Tony said, his face pained, and Steve’s jaw went tight. Tony sighed. “Look, I know you don’t approve, but-”

“No, I don’t, I do not approve of people taking your picture without your permission and, what, publishing it?” Steve could read the truth on his face, and the spike of rage caught him off guard. “It’s not right, I don’t care if they cry freedom of the press, it’s not right, and they shouldn’t be able to-”

“You are like the most adorable person ever, you know that,” Tony said, his arms folded over his chest. Steve gave him a look. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve seen you throw a man through a bus, so I’m still terrified of you, Cap, it’s just, that’s well tempered by the fact that you really are just as righteous as your propaganda would have us believe.”

“Gee, thanks,” Steve said, but Tony was smiling at him, that warm smile that made it impossible to be mad at him.

“So since you’re such a fine, morally upstanding man, I'm going to treat you to an all expenses paid weekend vacation here at Casa Stark,” Tony said, and his arm went around Steve’s back, his hand braced firmly in the middle of Steve’s back, amazingly warm through the thin material of Steve’s shirt.

“How nice of you,” Steve said, deadpan. “Though every time you offer me something on your dime, I always end up paying for it somehow, Tony.”

“I’m very tricky that way,” Tony said, and he was moving Steve firmly in the direction of the path through the well tended tropical gardens. “Don’t worry about the bags, the bellhop will get them.”

“We didn’t bring any bags,” Steve said.

“And there’s no bellhop, so it all works out,” Tony said, his tone breezy, and Steve couldn’t hold back a laugh. Tony grinned. “That’s the man I know and admire,” he said.

“you are such an ass,” Steve said, and it came out far too affectionate.

“Yes, it’s one of my more redeeming features,” Tony agreed. “Now, let’s go slip into something more comfortable.”

The trip from the airstrip to the villa was only a few minutes walk, and they were soon striding up to the front door. The villa was a sprawling building of mellow beige stucco with a red tile roof, with a massive round sunroom on one corner, and an actual facts balcony leading out to a second or third floor sundeck. Columns and massive windows and architectural flourishes abounded, and Steve had no idea how many rooms the place must have. It was too big and too ornate, but by Stark standards, it was almost sedate.

“Is that a pool?” Steve asked as Tony steered him up the neat brick front walk. He craned his neck, trying to catch a proper look at the blue expanse of water and even larger deck.

“It’s on that side of the building,” Tony explained, “so that you have a sea view.”

“A sea view. From the swimming pool,” Steve said.

“It’s a really good view,” Tony said, throwing open the front door. “Mi casa es su casa.” Steve looked up. And up.

The main vestibule was a wide open space of polished marble and natural sunlight from the windows, high up on the walls. A huge, curving staircase of gleaming dark wood lead up to the upper floors, and at the far end of the hall, a set of large glass doors led out to the pool deck.

He realized, a little too late, that Tony was waiting for a reaction. “It’s something else,” he said.

“For you, that actually counts as praise,” Tony said. “Let’s go, upstairs, you can have the master bedroom, it’s the nicest-”

“No, that’s not necessary,” Steve said, letting himself be steered up the staircase.

“I usually stay in that one, but you know what, if I want to impress you, I need to-”

“Tony, I really don’t care, it’s-”

Tony threw open a door. “Here we are,” Tony said with a grin. “Wash up, shave, do your thing, oh, and check the walk in closet, there’s usually some extra clothes in there, I’d say

nothing will fit, but you wear your shirts about three sizes too small anyway-”

“I do not-”

“And with shorts, we don’t have to worry about the length of those legs of yours,” Tony continued. “Settle in, I’m going to go see what’s up in the kitchen.” And with that, he was gone, leaving Steve gaping in his wake.

“Tony-” he started, but he was talking to the air, and in the distance, he heard Tony’s feet pounding their way down the stairs. Muttering a curse, Steve shut the door behind him, and turned around.

Only to find himself facing what was probably the biggest bed that he’d ever seen.

The rest of the room was huge, with big open spaces, and even bigger windows, the floors a mix of plush carpet and polished wood. It had a soaring ceiling, and a couple of skylights, and there were doors, a little further in, that he was sure lead to closets and bathroom. But the bed dominated the space, and in a strange sort of way. He frowned, not sure of why it had been placed where it was, until he stepped a little further into the room.

Then he realized that the bed had been situated so that when the patio style doors to the balcony were opened, and the skylights uncovered, the bed was perfectly placed to be bathed in whatever natural light there was. Gauzy white curtains hung in the doors, throwing delicate shadows over the froth of white bed linens.

Over Tony’s bed, and Steve knew that even thinking that thought was not going to help his ‘imagining Tony naked’ problem, not at all.

He headed for the bathroom. He needed the coldest shower he could get at this point.

*

Tony explored the kitchen -- he was sure he'd been here before at some point, but that point was probably pre-Iron Man, so who knew how accurate those memories were. And besides, he wanted to see what they would be eating for the next few days.

There was a lot of seafood in the fridge. Tony wondered how you did a clam bake. In his experience, clam bakes just *happened*, so it probably wasn't that complicated.

Steve seemed to be lingering over his shower, so Tony fixed a pitcher of mimosas, poured himself one, and went out to the paved terrace that overlooked the pool and beyond that, the beach. Whoever had stocked the kitchen had kindly set up deck chairs as well, so he slung his shirt off, tossed it aside, and settled into one of them. It was still in the shade, for now, but had every advantage otherwise -- the view, the breeze, and the little cafe table to put his drink on. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about what people were saying about him in New York right now.

"I realize it's five o'clock somewhere," Steve's voice said, off to his left and behind him, "but it's probably not as nice there."

"Mimosas are a brunch cocktail, heathen," Tony replied without opening his eyes. He fumbled for the drink, then felt it pressed into his grasp. "Thank you. There's more in the fridge."

"I think I'll just take my orange juice straight," Steve said, and there was a creak as he settled onto the other chair. Tony popped one eye open, risked a glance over, and nearly fell off the chair.

The shorts almost fit. They were a little baggy in the hips and a trifle too short for fashion, but they weren't indecent or even awkward looking. They were khaki, but Tony had learned you couldn't help some things about Steve Rogers.

The shirt, on the other hand...

"I know," Steve said, plucking at it. It was bright blue, patterned with toucans who were also primarily blue, and as Hawaiian shirts went it was tasteful. It was long enough, and the sleeves weren't too tight, unlike most of Steve's shirts.

It was also hanging open off his shoulders. When Tony checked, two of the buttons were missing.

"They're all a little tight around the chest," Steve said.

"I noticed," Tony replied. "Also apparently around the waist."

"I tried half-buttoning but it looked silly." Steve shrugged, resting a hand on his stomach, about half an inch above a patch of fuzzy gold hair disappearing into his shorts. He shot Tony a shy smile that tipped the whole thing from *startling* straight into *porn*. "I mean, nobody's around anyway, so I didn't figure it would offend."

"Steve, I'm pretty sure that wouldn't offend in the middle of Grand Central at rush hour," Tony replied, gathering his scattered wits. Ye gods. You saw photos, and the occasional flash of skin in a decontamination shower situation, but at rest, framed by the terrible blue shirt...

"So...what do we do?" Steve asked, and Tony jerked his eyes up from the sharp lines of Steve's pectorals.

"Uh. Nothing. We rest. We...bask," he said, taking another sip of the mimosa to cover the mental image he had of himself, tongue hanging out like a cartoon wolf in a nightclub.

"We bask," Steve repeated skeptically.

"Until we get hungry, then we eat, then we bask some more. Or swim, or surf, whatever," Tony waved a hand airily. He leaned back, closing his eyes again.

About two minutes later, Steve said, "I'm gonna get a book."

"Thank God. There's probably a first-gen StarkPad around somewhere, grab it for me, would you?" Tony asked.

Steve laughed, and a second later Tony felt a fleeting, affectionate touch across his head -- Steve ruffling his hair as he passed. It startled him into stillness for a moment, eyes opening, but Steve was already gone, banging around in one of the living rooms for something to keep himself entertained. Tony sat very still until he came back, carrying two books, a clunky, older-model StarkPad, and a folded-up backgammon board. He settled back in his chair, passed the StarkPad across to Tony, and then extremely unsubtly moved the mimosa out of reach. Tony decided to ignore it, and opened up the pad instead. Apparently it was too old to take a satellite uplink, so no internet, but it had some interesting if elderly blueprints on it for forgotten projects. Also, Minesweeper.

He became aware, as he worked, of a sort of unlikely peace: no blasting music, no distractions, no concerns for SI. It wasn't normally his gig, all this quiet -- it tended to leave him adrift and unfocused -- but the regular crackle of Steve turning pages as he read and the distant crash of the surf was sort of nice. If you liked that kind of thing.

The sun was sliding up the terrace, making its way slowly over Steve's chair first, and the air got warmer, more humid, though the breeze kept it from being too stifling. When light finally edged over Steve's chair, he closed his book and stood up, tugging the shirt off his shoulders.

"Water looks fine," he said. "Might as well take advantage of it."

Tony watched over the edge of the pad propped on his knees as Steve, with *absolutely none* of the reluctance he'd shown earlier, took his shorts off.

It was not even that disappointing that he was wearing speedos underneath, because they were Stark Industries branded speedos. Besides, Steve's thighs were a work of art that shouldn't be covered up anyway.

"I'm fine here," Tony croaked.

Steve shrugged. "See you in a bit," he said, and padded quickly across the terrace, leaping into a dive at the deep end of the pool. Tony watched him dip below the water repeatedly, apparently diving just for the hell of it. At one point his legs emerged, like he was a kid practicing underwater handstands, and Tony grinned.

The sun was crawling up his legs, warming him pleasantly, when he opened a new window on the tablet and typed, *Note to self: do not make pass at Steve Rogers.*

***

Steve was swimming in a heated pool within sight of the warm, natural waters of the Gulf of Mexico. He was pretty sure something had gone wrong in his life, and he wasn’t sure where or when. But here he was. In a heated pool.

He’d intended to head for the beach. He’d gotten up with the express idea of going down to the beach, and then Tony had looked at him, and Steve had lost his mind and shucked his shorts. He’d almost forgotten just how small these swim trunks were, but he’d remembered damn quick when Tony had arched an amused eyebrow at him.

And all of a sudden, the pool had seemed like a mighty safe harbor.

Now, of course, he was trapped, because Tony was right there, sprawled out half naked in the deck chair. Steve was pretty sure he could make the villa's back door without embarrassing himself too much, but Tony would probably notice if he made a break for it. Instead, he just slumped lower in the water, until just his eyes were above the surface.

Tony stretched, the muscles of his arms and shoulders pulling tight as he rolled over, reaching for his drink again. The expanse of his back caught the light, and Steve ducked under the water.

When he came back up, Tony had adjusted the chair, and himself, and was now sprawled out on his stomach, his arms folded under his chin, the tablet in easy reach. "You're going to get a sunburn," Steve said without thinking, and Tony glanced in his direction.

"Not all of us are melanin deficient Irish boys like you," Tony said, grinning. "I got a lot of bad things from my parents, but the Mediterranean heritage helps me out here." His eyes closed, his chin half buried in his arms. "My people have been lounging by the sea for centuries."

"Uh-huh." Steve took the opportunity to pull himself out of the water, and lunged for the stack of towels on a nearby chaise lounge. In two quick steps, he'd snagged a towel and wrapped it around his waist. By the time that Tony's eyes flicked open again, Steve had the plush fabric knotted around his hips. Tony's eyebrows arched.

"Done swimming already?" he asked, amusement rolling through the words.

"You need sunscreen," Steve said.

"I'm fine," Tony said, his eyes tracking Steve's movements from beneath the sweep of his dark lashes. When Steve gave him a look, Tony just grinned, a smug little twitch of his lips. "But if you want to lotion up, I'm sure there's some to be found." He waved an easy hand at the little poolside cabana. "You can check in there, there's a little wicker dresser thing, if I remember correctly. It's all so very rustic."

"I'm not certain you've got the definition of 'rustic' quite right," Steve said, his voice wry, as he headed in that direction. He pushed the fabric curtain out of the way, finding a few pieces of weathered furniture and a lounge style bed piled high with pillows. Steve gave it a dirty look; the last thing this weekend needed was another damn bed.

There was a dresser, and he focused on that, opening the top drawer. There was a basket of sunscreens and suntan oils, as well as aloe and after sun lotions, and he snagged one with a high SPF. Curious, he opened the other drawers, finding them full of brand new bathing suits and towels. Almost everything had a StarkIndustries logo on it somewhere, to his amusement.

Maybe Tony did a lot of business meetings out here. With people in very small swimsuits.

“Find anything?” Tony called, and Steve jerked his hand away from yet another tiny pair of swim trunks.

“And more,” Steve agreed. He headed back into the sun. “Here, put this on.”

Tony opened one eye. “I’m fine. You’re the one-”

“I’ll heal,” Steve said, crossing over to Tony’s side “You won’t.” He held out the tube. “You should-”

“I’m comfortable, right as I am.” Tony’s eye closed again. “If you’re so determined that I should put it on, you can do it for me.”

Steve stared down at him. “This is a new level of lazy that you’ve stooped to,” he said.

Tony grinned, not moving an inch. “Well, it’s not like I can reach my back, anyway. Either you do it, or I guess I’ll just have to go without.”

Steve popped the lid off of the sun screen. “You really think that’s the only option here?” he asked.

“Only one I can see,” Tony said.

Steve pulled the towel off his waist and threw it over Tony’s head and shoulders, burying him under a pile of damp terrycloth. “Huh,” he mused. “Whatta you know. That’ll keep the sun off of you, too.”

There was a moment of silence. “Maybe so,” Tony said, his voice muffled. “But I might also suffocate.”

“So sit up,” Steve said, throwing himself back down on his own deck chair. And because he wanted to set a good example, he dumped some of the lotion into his hand and began rubbing it into his arms.

*

Tony was actually sort of enjoying the cool dampness of the towel -- the problem with sunbathing was, of course, that you were lying in the sun, which could get overly warm -- but it did start to feel clammy fairly quickly. When he pushed it off and propped himself on his elbows to look over, Steve was working on his shoulders, head dipped forward to get at the back of his neck.

Tony slid his elbows down again, resting his head sideways on them so he could keep watching. This was not technically defying his note to self; you couldn't get in too much trouble just looking. And Steve, bless him, was gloriously oblivious when it came to how attractive he was. He genuinely didn't seem to notice people flirting with him until long after they'd given up, if he noticed at all.

He did wonder, sometimes, whether Steve was lonely -- or, well, given his situation, of course he was lonely, but perhaps...how conscious he was of it. Or how much it bothered

him. He had friends now, at least, Sam and Natasha and the others. And Tony, of course. Tony was his friend.

Friends. That was sure what they were, Tony thought, as he distractedly watched Steve apply sunscreen to his chest.

"I guess I'm not so great at basking," Steve said, as he set the bottle aside. There was a thin streak of white on the side of his nose where he'd missed rubbing it in completely. "Hey, I found a backgammon board. You want to play?"

"What, no Chutes and Ladders?" Tony asked, not bothering to prop himself up again yet.

"Is that like Mah Jongg?" Steve asked.

"You know Mah Jongg but not Chutes and Ladders?"

Steve shrugged. "Mah Jongg was popular in the 20s. Anyway, Backgammon?"

"Sure," Tony replied, yawning and pushing himself up, shifting so that he sat on the edge of the chair. Steve pulled the little table between the two chairs, unfolding the board. It had probably never been meant to be played with, only displayed, and was definitely antique. It had come with the villa, like much of the furnishings. When Tony picked up one of the white checkers, he was pretty sure it was ivory. The black checkers looked like they might be small chips of granite.

"Fancy," was all Steve said, before offering him the heavy, probably-also-ivory dice. "We find a pack of cards later, I'll teach you Red Howl."

"Red Howl?" Tony asked, rolling a 6-2 and moving his checkers. "I don't think I know that game."

"We made it up. Back in the war," Steve said. "The rules take some mastering, but it's kinda like Hearts. Only with a lot more betting and swearing."

"Two of my favorite pastimes. You invented a card game?" Tony asked. "Poker not good enough for the Greatest Generation?"

"Hey, you play poker with a half a dozen jerks in a mud pit in the south of Italy for long enough, you learn everyone's tells and the game's no fun. Bad for morale, anyway, the way I cleaned out Duggan every week."

"So you just made one up?"

"Well, not just me, it was a group effort," Steve said. They were rolling and moving, faster than Tony had expected; Steve was apparently as cutthroat in Backgammon as he was at cards.

A sudden thought occurred to him -- more like a barb passed through him, really, less a thought than a memory, and his hands grew cold and numb, fumbling the dice. Before he could stop himself, he heard the words come out of his mouth.

"Yinsen and I used to play Backgammon in the caves," he said. It sounded remarkably casual, given that his throat was closing in panic.

"Oh yeah?" Steve asked, hardly paying attention. "Were you as bad at it then as you are now?"

The tension abruptly fell, forced away by a startled laugh, and Tony glanced up at him. Steve's eyes were calculating, but the rest of him was at ease, relaxed.

"Lulling you into a false sense of security," Tony said.

"I thought the kids these days called it *sucking*," Steve said, knocking one of his checkers to the bar.

"Oh, he trash talks now!" Tony said. "That's very good, very cute. But you know what? I'm gonna be classy."

"First time for everything," Steve murmured.

"I'm not going to make any jokes at your expense, not even old age jokes," Tony said.

To be fair, Steve could smell a setup coming a mile away. He rolled the dice and said, "And why won't you make any old age jokes, Tony?"

"I'm not sure your blood pressure can take it."

"Here I thought you were gonna make a Viagra joke, but I guess those hit a little close to home."

"Only because my erections can last four hours or longer."

"Tony!" Steve said, looking genuinely shocked. "Jeez!"

"I win!" Tony cried, throwing his arms over his head like a boxer.

"I'm not sure you should be quite so proud of that," Steve told him. Tony grinned and took one of Steve's checkers. "You're not putting me off my game with sex talk."

"You're right, that would be fighting dirty."

"Tony."

"Filthy. Naughty."

Steve sighed, one of his "I'm about to genuinely lose my patience" sighs, so Tony backed off, settling down to play again.

"Was he any good?" Steve asked, after a while. Tony glanced at him. "Your friend Yinsen. Was he good at Backgammon?"

"He was a champion at Cambridge. Used to beat me a lot, but then I was not at my best," Tony said. Speaking indirectly -- not having to look at Steve, not having to think about Yinsen except as he had played the game, made it easier. "He made us a board in his spare time. We played with nuts and washers. I was always nuts, because I'm perpetually twelve. Man, he put up with a lot of bullshit from me, considering where we were."

"Sounds like a decent guy."

"Yeah. He'd've liked you. Way better than he liked me, anyway."

"He died for you. I read the report."

"That report was classified."

"Captain America," Steve said with a shrug.

Tony rolled the dice. "He didn't die for me specifically. He'd have died for anyone willing to torch that camp. They killed his family. I wasn't his friend, Steve, I was his tool. Still. He was more decent than I had a right to expect."

"What, no infamous Stark charm to be had?" Steve asked. Tony glanced up at him. "Everyone likes you, sooner or later. Almost everyone, anyhow. I bet he liked you more than you knew."

"You are really good," Tony said, watching Steve knock another one of his checkers to the bar, "at both inspiring speeches and Backgammon."

"I get up early each morning to practice," Steve told him gravely, and Tony almost believed him until a corner of his mouth twitched up.

"You keep working on that butter-wouldn't-melt face," he said.

Steve laughed and changed the subject -- lightly, like they hadn't just been talking about a defining moment of Tony's life inbetween cracking jokes about each other. They finished their game and started another; Tony went for a mimosa refill and came back with a prepackaged plate of cheese and smoked meat as well, which he nibbled on and Steve absently demolished during games two and three.

"Do you realize," Steve said, around game five, "you've literally spent the whole day in your pajamas?"

"Won't be the last time, either," Tony said. "What, you want me to dress for dinner, Captain Speedo?"

Steve flushed. Tony wasn't sure he even knew he'd tugged a towel over his lap self-consciously. "Yes, actually. At least put on some fresh ones."

"Yeah, I guess that's fair," Tony said, examining a hole in the seam of the pants. "Are you hungry, is this a hint you're dropping?"

"I'm pretty much always hungry," Steve admitted.

"Okay, well, you go change into something more comfortable," Tony said with a grin, enjoying Steve's squirm, "and I'll put some real clothing on and get a start on dinner."

"You're cooking dinner?" Steve asked, and Tony had really more imagined that he would put food out that he wanted to eat and Steve would cook it, but Steve looked kind of tired, and Tony had basically abducted him -- making him cook was probably declasse.

"Sure," he said. Steve frowned. "What?"

"Pepper says you can't cook."

"I can cook."

"You don't cook, though."

"No, but that doesn't mean I *can't*," Tony said.

How hard could it be, after all? He did the omelette that one time.

Chapter 3

It was probably the longest shower of his entire life, and it likely would've been even longer, if not for the fact that his phone was vibrating, audible even from a distance. Steve turned off the shower, and grabbed for a towel.

He dripped his way across the carpet, snagging his phone from the dresser. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure I should be asking you that," Rhodey said, his tone arch and warm. "Pep said that you'd been shanghaied, thought I'd check in and make sure that you haven't decided to toss Tony into the ocean."

"He can swim," Steve said, unconcerned. "He's fine. He's downstairs, making dinner."

"Tony."

"Yes," Steve said, switching to speaker phone so he could dry his hair.

"Tony Stark."

"That's the man."

"Are we thinking about the same Tony Stark?" Rhodey said. In the background, Steve could hear the familiar sounds of the HUD and the rush of wind. "Dark hair, goatee, addiction to overpriced sunglasses and a mouth that gets him in trouble regularly?"

"Sounds like the right fella," Steve agreed, grinning. He stepped into a clean pair of shorts. "He's smart, Rhodey, he can cook."

"He can, he just doesn't," Rhodey said. "For good reason."

Steve's eyes rolled. "He'll be fine. Pepper have any news?"

"Nothing to speak of," Rhodey said. "We've got a couple of websites claiming they've got pictures of Tony, in the altogether. However, no one's released anything yet, so it's likely they're just dangling some clickbait. Either it'll die off, or someone'll post a fake or two."

Steve tugged a shirt over his head. "We're sure?" He wasn't sure why this was a 'we' situation, but the word fit, it was comforting and easy and he liked being part of the 'we' of Rhodey and Pepper. He liked that they trusted him, that Tony trusted him enough to include him in their company.

"If they had anything, they would've released it already, to make sure that no one beat them to it," Rhodey said. "Pep thinks that they're digging for who his travelling companion was. Laying hints in the hope that someone will talk."

Steve's stomach dropped. "His… Travelling companion?"

“If Tony was hanging out naked on the beach, chances are there was a reason for it,” Rhodey said. He paused. “Tony hasn’t…. Said anything to you about that?”

Steve picked up the phone, some of his enjoyment of the situation dying at the thought of Tony, just days before, in someone else’s company. Smiling at someone else. Naked and comfortable with it.

“Steve?”

“No,” he said. “We’ve been swimming, reading, playing backgammon, he hasn’t said a thing.”

“Okay,” Rhodey said. “And now he’s cooking?”

“Now he’s cooking.”

“You should probably go check on that.”

“I’m sure he’s-”

The fire alarm went off.

“I should go,” Steve said, already running for the stairs. His bare feet skidded on the wooden floor as he came out of the bedroom, and he ran for the stairs, already able to smell the smoke.

“Yeah, I can hear.” Rhodey was clearly trying to stifle a laugh. “Cap? Seriously here. Don’t eat whatever he’s made. You’ve got quite the immune system, but I still don’t think that it’s quite a match for Tony’s cooking.”

“You underestimate me, Rhodes.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve seen his attempts at cooking. I’ve learned, and you should learn from my mistakes.” He chuckled. “I’ll keep you posted on things out here in the real world.”

“I appreciate that,” Steve said, his voice calm. “Stay safe, you hear me?”

“Don’t you have enough people to ride herd on?” Rhodey asked. “You gotta start in on me?”

“I’ve always got room for another on the team-” Steve started, a familiar refrain; he could give the sales pitch without even thinking about it, but that didn’t mean he didn’t mean every word.

“Oh, no, not a chance. Good try, Captain America, but I’m not getting roped into your pack of costumed loons,” Rhodey said.

Steve hopped over the bannister, landing neatly on the first floor, already running. Smoke was pouring out of the kitchen, dimming the air of the hall. “Yeah, those red white and blue costumes are pretty embarrassing, huh, Iron Patriot?”

“Hey, at least my embarrassing paint job shoots missiles. Something to think about.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Steve said, hand resting briefly on the door of the kitchen. It was cool, as he’d expected, but instinct kicked in at the strangest times. “Gotta go.”

“Don’t eat it,” Rhodey said, and Steve’s eyes rolled, even as he disconnected the call.

“Tony?” he called, pushing the door open. Smoke billowed out, and he felt a brief spike of panic.

“I’ve got it under control,” Tony said, and Steve’s shoulders slumped in relief.

“I can see that.” Or rather, he couldn’t. Steve jammed the kitchen door open, and backtracked into the hallway to throw the doors to the patio open as well. The alarm was still blaring, but the air was already starting to clear. “What’s going-”

“You know what?” Tony stalked past him, a smoking stock pot in his hands. He had a scowl on his face and something that looked like a mix of flour in his hair and on his clothes, and he smelled like a strange combination of olive oil and garlic and maple syrup. Tony walked out to the back patio and threw the pot. Steve was pretty sure he heard a splash.

Shaking his head, he headed into the kitchen. Opening the windows, one by one, he surveyed the damage. It was pretty extensive. The marble countertops were almost completely obscured by boxes and bowls, ingredients tumbling over each other, grains of rice cascading over the half chopped onions and carrots that had been chopped until they were nearly mush. A tomato bled down the front of a cabinet. A pan had bubbled over on the burner, liquid and solid burned solid and black on the polished surface, and a saucepan had been overturned to drip down the front of the oven.

Steve took a deep breath, and let it out on a sigh. He let his head fall forward, and immediately regretted it as he caught sight of the floor.

“Not a word,” Tony snarled, stomping back in, his face a smudged thundercloud.

“How many eggs did you drop?” Steve asked, poking a shattered shell with one toe. The box had clearly split on impact, and there was a clear imprint of a footprint in the middle, where Tony had stepped wrong and lost his balance.

“Eleven.”

“Well, at least you managed to save one,” Steve said. Tony’s hand settled on his chin, tipping Steve’s head back up, towards the ceiling. Steve blinked at the yellowish, dripping smudge just above their heads. “Or not.”

“Or not,” Tony agreed. There was a flush to his cheeks, a tense set to his jaw, frustration and embarrassment warring in his expression. “There’s more in the fridge. I can fix it.”

“Tony-”

“No, you’re right, I can’t fix it, what the fuck, this is-” Tony shoved both hands through his hair, and flour fluttered like snow from his locks. “The recipe looked good on the internet.”

“A lot of things look good on the internet,” Steve said, biting back a smile. “Come here, you’ve got, I think-” He rubbed at Tony’s cheek, and without thinking, brought up the hem of his shirt, swiping at Tony’s face with the damp fabric. Catching himself far too late, Steve jerked back, his face heating. “How did you get so much flour-”

“I turned the mixer on high and there was a bit of an over powered problem there, so that, that’s a thing that happened, it’s fine, I can fix THAT, or maybe I’ll just toss it off of a cliff, that’d work too.” Tony scrubbed a hand over his face. “Fuck it, I’ll have something delivered.”

“I don’t think your favorite Chinese place delivers out here,” Steve said, wiping his hands on a mostly clean towel.

“Rogers, let me give you a hint,” Tony said. “For enough money, ANYONE delivers ANYWHERE.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not there, not yet.” Steve opened the fridge, leaning in. His eyes narrowed on the contents. “Clear me a spot on the counter. Where’re the pans?”

A series of thunks and a few muttered swears brought his head up. He watched, amused, as Tony tossed things into the trash bin. Steve rested an arm against the edge of the refrigerator door, watching as Tony removed the worst of the disaster with the same sort of zeal that he’d probably put into the attempt at cooking. The smile that crossed his face was a bit too sappy, a bit too affectionate, and leaned back into the fridge.

A paper wrapped package looked promising, and he grabbed it, as well as a few other familiar ingredients. He wasn’t a fancy cook, but he could manage a few things. “Go take a shower,” he said, as Tony dumped the cutting board, knife, vegetables and all into the trash. Steve fished the knife back out, and turned to the sink to wash it.

“I can do this,” Tony said, and there was a note there, something beneath the petulance and the anger.

“Go get cleaned up, and then we can make dinner together,” Steve said. He glanced back over his shoulder at Tony. “I think I’d prefer that. Wouldn’t you?” Tony’s gaze was dark and unreadable, his face a mask that Steve could never quite figure out. Steve turned back to the counter, grabbing a dishcloth to wipe the surface down. “I always liked…” His shoulders rose and fell in a slight shrug. “I like this.”

“Cooking?” Tony asked.

“Cooking with other people,” Steve said. He glanced at Tony, his fingers tight on the cloth, too tight. “With, well, you.” His eyes slid in Tony’s direction. “With everyone,” he added quickly.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “I like it when Clint does the cooking,” he said.

Steve smiled. “Well, you should’ve brought Clint, then.” The counter clean, he opened the paper package. It contained a few heavy, thick cut porterhouse steaks, and Steve’s smile stretched. “How about a steak?” he asked Tony.

Tony wandered up behind him, the heat from his body warming Steve’s back. “That could be okay,” he said, as if the words were being dragged out of him.

“I think so, too.” Steve looked over his shoulder, and Tony was so close that one step on either one of their parts and they’d be touching. All Steve had to do was lean, just the smallest bit, and he could kiss those lips, now set in a distinct frown.

He wondered if he kissed Tony, if Tony would stop frowning.

“Yeah, all right,” Tony said, and Steve had been staring so intently at those lips, that remarkable, quicksilver mouth, that he almost did it. He leaned in, his whole body swaying in that direction, as if pulled, and only a glimpse of Tony’s eyes going wide stopped him.

He jerked away, crashing against the counter, his hands grabbing for the knife, for the bowl, for anything that was within reach. “All right,” he said, a bit too loud, and his hands were shaking, he was an idiot, he was an absolute fool.

“So, I’ll just, I’ll go shower,” Tony said, and a moment later, he was out of the kitchen, and gone. Steve waited until he was safely gone before he swore, soft and full of self-disgust.

*

Tony didn't do failure particularly well.

It was something he knew about himself. The margin for it as a child had been narrow, and the punishment, generally, was Howard taking whatever it was out of his hands and doing it himself while Tony watched. As punishments went, not traumatic, perhaps, but humiliating nonetheless. Pepper gave him a much larger margin, but the end result when he did (very, very rarely) fail was the same -- she sighed and said she'd handle it, and while it did get handled, it didn't particularly feel great watching someone else clean up after him. Mess was okay, as long as you made it on the way to success. Mess on the way to failure was mess wasted.

He expected, when he came out of the shower a painfully long time later (flour proved difficult to wash out, oil doubly so) that Steve would have just cooked the steaks and had done with it, but when he came downstairs, there was no sign of any cooking happening. There was also no sign of Steve.

"Cap?" he called, gathering a series of prep bowls he had optimistically attempted to use and dumping them in the sink.

"Out here," Steve's voice drifted back to him. Tony peered through an open window onto the patio that led to the beach. Steve was crouched over a hole Tony had not noticed before, poking at something with a long wrought-iron bar. It was smoking.

"Jesus, did it re-ignite?" he asked.

Steve looked at him over his shoulder, grinning. "It's a fire pit, Tony. I ignited it on purpose. If you're coming out here, grab the dish from the fridge, wouldja?"

Tony, intrigued now, opened the fridge and looked inside. There was a glass dish on one of the shelves, covered with a cheery plastic lid and filled with a murky brown liquid, the steaks just barely rising over the top of it. He picked it up with the same care he'd use for a crucible, carrying it perfectly balanced and watching where he was walking as he made his way out to Steve.

"Thanks," Steve said, poking the fire that was now roaring in the pit. "Help me put the grill down."

"Is this meant for this?" Tony asked, perplexed, as he helped Steve maneuver a grating made of rebar into place over the fire.

"Sure. Beats what we used in the war," Steve said absently, using the iron bar from before to roll something out of the flame. Tony watched, mystified, as he wrangled half a dozen foil-wrapped packages from the fire onto the patio. They each had a metal spike through the middle.

"Potatoes," Steve said. "Let the grill heat up, come on back inside."

He eased the foil-wrapped potatoes onto a plate, and Tony trailed behind him back into the kitchen.

"We used to just eat them straight," Steve said, "but if we had a pot and some greens I could usually manage something like colcannon. I'll mash, you chop the cabbage."

"Cabbage," Tony repeated.

"It'll eat well," Steve replied, fixing him with a level look. "Go on, it's in the fridge. Grab a leek and some shallots, too."

"Why did they give us leeks?" Tony asked, rummaging in the crisper drawer. He was on a more stable footing when it came to vegetables, at least raw ones; he knew how to make a smoothie. Well, better than Dummy did, anyway.

"Lots of things you can do with a leek," Steve replied. "Get chopping."

They worked in silence for a few minutes, Tony focusing on not taking off a thumb while Steve set butter sizzling in a pan and mashed the potatoes in a bowl, adding milk like he was some kind of chemist. Tony felt himself calming, slowly.

"Toss it all in," Steve said, pointing to the pan. "Give it a stir -- slowly!" he yelped, as Tony stirred perhaps a little more vigorously than necessary.

"What's the point of slow?" Tony asked.

"Not raining molten butter on your cooking partner," Steve said. "Keep stirring. Slowly. I'm going to put the steaks on. How you like your meat?"

"Not a big fan of intestinal parasites."

"You're not going to catch anything from rare steak, Tony."

"When I get worms, you'll be sorry."

"Lovely," Steve laughed, stepping back outside. Tony heard a hiss and a sizzle as the meat landed on the grill.

"Stir!" Steve called, and Tony bent back to the pan. "Then dump it on the potatoes and stir those."

"Sir, yes sir," Tony yelled back, carefully pouring the vegetables into the bowl. They didn't blend particularly well when he stirred gently.

He was eyeing the mixer, wondering if this was a job for the over-souped machine, when Steve came back in, whacked him gently on the back of the head, and said "Don't even think about it."

"Fine, you do it," Tony said, and Steve reached around him, plucked the spoon out of his hand, and leaned over his shoulder. He could feel the warmth of him all the way up his spine.

"Heh," Steve said, essentially in his ear. "It's fine. Looks good."

Tony fought down a frisson of arousal at the nearness and the voice in his ear, and looked down at the potatoes instead. Steve stayed where he was, hovering almost close enough to touch, for what felt like a long time.

"See?" he said finally, one hand on Tony's hip to shift him to the side a little. "That was better, right? I'll get the plates, you bring the bowl," he added, gathering cutlery and plates from the cupboards. "Don't touch the meat, it's resting."

"It's resting," Tony repeated.

"Yes, leave it alone."

Tony poked the steaks, which were sitting on the plastic lid, steaming gently. "Meat and potatoes. Very working-class Brooklyn, Rogers."

"Fills you up, not that we got steak much in working-class Brooklyn," Steve said with a shrug, handing him a plate. He gently lifted one of the steaks onto Tony's place and then the other onto his, setting a spoon in the potato bowl. "Yours is medium. And a travesty."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony replied, slicing the end off the steak and taking a bite. He raised his eyebrows at Steve.

"Don't think this means I'm going to be default chef around the Tower," Steve said.

"We could pay you. Get you a chef's hat," Tony offered, taking another huge bite of the steak. "I'd put a big white star on it," he added with his mouth full. "Make you a really nice wok, paint it your colors."

"Shut up and eat your steak," Steve ordered. Tony grinned, and thumbed some juice off his chin.

***

“I didn’t burn the house down.”

Steve grinned down at his steak. “You’re right,” he said, busy with his dinner. “Your point?”

Tony pointed his fork in Steve’s general direction. “We’ve gotta look at the bright side, here,” he said. The table on the patio looked out over the ocean, and the cooling air held a tang of salt and sea spray. Unlike the table in the dining room, this one was just large enough for the two of them, and maybe not even that. Even though Steve had to watch where his legs ended up, it felt comfortable, sitting there with Tony and a good meal. Along with the steaks and colcannon, Steve had managed a simple green salad, and Tony had come up with a couple of beers to go along with it all.

“The best bright side you can come up with is that you didn’t, actually, burn the house down?” Steve asked, laughter running through his words.

Tony tucked a bite of steak into his mouth. He chewed, his eyes narrowing as he thought about that. “It’s a pretty good bright side,” he said.

“It does mean we have a roof over our heads tonight,” Steve said, amused.

“That’s kind of a shame, I think there’s a hammock around here somewhere…”

“Also, you did a great job with the colcannon.”

“You’re humoring me.”

“Maybe,” Steve admitted.

“Don’t humor me,” Tony said, grinning. He reached for his beer, juggling his plate and his silverware as he brought the bottle to his lips. Steve watched as Tony’s head tipped back, his throat working as he drained the last few swallows. A little too late, Steve caught himself staring, and fumbled for his own bottle. The high end microbrew was surprisingly tasty, crisp and full bodied.

“What makes you think I’m humoring you?” Steve asked, before taking a drink.

“You get this little smile, not quite a smirk, but edging on a smirk, it’s not well done of you.” Tony bounced the mouth of the bottle against his lower lip, and Steve did not need any further ammunition for his oral fixation.

“I can’t help it if you’re an amusing sort of fella,” Steve said, pushing himself to his feet. “Want another?”

Tony considered the bottle. His cheeks were pink, a combination of sun and good food and drink. “Sure,” he said. “Thanks, Cap.”

Steve took his time in the kitchen, tossing a pan or two in the sink and considering the collection of bottles in the fridge before he selected a two and headed back outside. He snapped the cap off with a flick of his thumb and offered it to Tony, who considered it, then Steve, then the bottle again. Steve arched an eyebrow. “Change your mind?”

“You know that wasn’t a twist off, right?”

Steve shrugged as Tony took the bottle from him. “No. Doesn’t seem to have changed the result, though.” He settled back in his chair, and his feet bumped into Tony’s, and he shifted to the side, his face heating.

“You’re full of hidden talents,” Tony said. “I’ve wasted so much money on church keys.”

“Glad to be of service.” Steve dug back in, his attention mostly on the rather spectacular sunset. They sat in companionable silence, until Tony pushed his plate away with a happy sigh.

“I think I’m done,” he said, resting a hand on the flat of his stomach. “Want the rest of mine?”

“No, I have-” Steve looked down at his plate, surprised to find that he’d finished his steak. “I guess I don’t, actually,” he said. “I must’ve been hungrier than I thought.”

“Yeah, that metabolism of yours is a thing of beauty.” Tony held his plate out. “Finish mine.”

“I don’t-”

“Then I’ll have to throw it away,” Tony said, his eyes fluttering innocently.

Steve shook his head. “Or you could save it for breakfast, and have it with eggs,” he said, just to see Tony’s expression of mock horror. “You know, leftovers.”

“Leftovers?” Tony asked, aghast. He clutched at his chest, his eyes wide. “What- I don’t understand.”

“You are both the worst fake and the most wasteful person I know,” Steve said, taking the steak off of Tony’s plate. Tony had done a pretty good job on it, but about half of it was still left. Steve dug in, still hungrier than he wanted to admit.

“Yeah, but you are self-sacrificing,” Tony said, stretching his legs out in front of him. “Also occasionally very disapproving of my habits and my general world view. The easiest way to get you to do what I want is to manipulate that. It’s a fun tactic.” He set his plate aside, relaxing back in his chair, his face flushed, his eyes at half mast. “I enjoy it.”

“I’ve had a busy day,” Steve pointed out. “You, meanwhile, spent the day napping and poking a computer screen. You didn’t even go swimming.” He gave Tony a disapproving look. “You came all the way out here and you did the same thing you did at home.”

“No, at home, I would’ve done it with a shirt on.”

“That’s what makes it a vacation?” Steve asked. “That you’re half-naked?”

“I can be all naked if you asked a little nicer,” Tony said, grinning. “Is asking me to go swimming just your way of getting my pants off?”

Steve rolled his eyes, steadfastly ignoring the heat that pooled low in his stomach at the thought. “If you were looking for a weekend tryst, pretty sure you invited the wrong person, Stark.”

“And isn’t that a pity?” Tony said, unrepentant. He rolled to his feet. “But while you were doing dog paddling, lovely form by the way, have I mentioned that? If you ever decide to give up on the super heroing, I can offer you a job as a model for my swimwear line.”

“You have a swimwear line?” Steve asked.

“No, but if you agree to model it, I’m willing to invest in the concept,” Tony said, and ducked the napkin that Steve tossed at his head. “As I was saying, while you were splashing around, I remembered one of the best features of this place.”

“And what would that be?”

“Finish your dinner, and I’ll show you.” Tony slipped behind him, his hand sliding across the length of Steve’s shoulders as he went.

Steve turned, watching as he jogged down to the pool. “Need any help?” he called.

“Finish your dinner!” Tony yelled back, and then he was gone into one of the nearby cabanas.

Shaking his head, Steve finished the last few bites and collected their plates. Heading back to the house, empty bottles and plates stacked in his hands, he caught a glimpse of Tony wrestling a large lounge chair into the pool. Designed to float, it bobbed slowly away from the edge, and Steve made quick work of putting the dishes away.

When he came back out, Tony was standing next to the pool, stripped down to a pair of swim trunks and staring up at the side of the villa. “I think it’s-” His eyes narrowed. “Ready?”

“For what?” Steve asked, coming up behind him.

“For this.” Tony held up his tablet, tapping his fingers across the surface, and the lights of the pool deck dimmed. At the same time, a screen slowly unfurled from a hidden niche beneath the roof, descending towards the ground. Behind them, a digital projector rose from beneath the stone of the patio, clicking into place and starting up with a whir.

Steve looked from the projector, to the screen, to the chairs that were floating in the pool. “Wow,” he said at last, because Tony was giving him an expectant look.

“I know,” Tony agreed. He tossed the tablet onto the float and jumped in. A moment later, he was hauling himself into the floating lounge, balancing himself and the tablet with a modicum of fuss. “Let’s watch a movie, Cap. What are you in the mood for?” he asked, grinning at Steve. “I’ve got a whole digital library at my fingertips.”

Steve looked at the screen. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “You know that, don’t you?”

“An outdoor film projected onto a screen on the side of a villa on a private island designed to be viewed from floating deck chairs in a pool overlooking the ocean?” Tony asked, utterly deadpan about it. “I cannot imagine what you’d find ridiculous about that.”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “Everything?”

“Look, Rogers, this is an easy choice. I mean, you can go inside and turn in early like the senior citizen you are,” Tony said. “Or you can stop being a stodgy old man and get your ass in the pool so I can crank this sucker up.”

Steve caught himself grinning, wide and bright. “How about something with Cary Grant?” he asked.

“To Catch a Thief?”

Steve stripped his shirt off, draping it neatly over the back of a chair. “Sounds good to me.” Stepping forward, he executed a neat dive, cutting into the water with a minimal splash and surfacing next to Tony. For the moment, he ignored the second deck chair, just propping his folded arms on the end of Tony’s lounge. Tony, without being asked, moved his feet so Steve could see. “Start it up.”

*

Steve eventually climbed into his own chair in the pool, which on the one hand meant Tony could stretch out again, but on the other hand meant they were sort of...floating all over, occasionally knocking into each other. Tony had tied the floating cooler to the arm of his chair (a lesson learned during spring break, probably younger than it should have been) and sipped beer, half watching the movie, half watching Steve, who was a very *involved* movie watcher.

He got so wrapped up even in old cheesy films, laughing more easily, occasionally gasping at tense moments, always watching intently. Tony could picture him, pint-sized, paying a nickel to get into the movie house every week to see whatever was playing. He couldn't imagine Steve ever took dates to the movies -- he seemed like the kind of guy who didn't want any interruptions or distractions.

He handed a beer off to Steve as they floated near each other, and Steve absently twisted the top off and passed it back, flipping the cap into the cooler. Last beer; he'd worked his way slowly through a six-pack, and he was feeling pleasantly lazy. It was nice, and the next time

they floated close to each other, he tossed the cooler's tie around the arm of Steve's chair to link them. Steve flinched with the momentary change in balance, then grinned at him.

"So, more fun than napping?" Tony asked.

"Needlessly indulgent, but yes," Steve admitted.

"Sorry I killed the beer, apparently," Tony said, kicking the cooler away.

"I'm not much on fancy craft beers anyway."

"It wasn't that fancy."

"It was grapefruit flavored. Shush, I'm watching the movie."

Tony relaxed back in the chair, head tilted to watch Steve, and it was probably fifteen minutes before Steve even noticed, which in itself was a feat. Steve wasn't hypervigilant, exactly, but he could be pretty edgy, sometimes to the point of defensiveness. Not caring that he was being watched was a good thing.

"What, I got something on my face?" he asked, when he finally noticed Tony watching.

"Nah. I've seen the movie before. Watching you is more fun," he said, tongue looser than intended.

It was hard to see in the dark, with only the light of the movie reflecting off his face, but he thought he saw Steve redden.

"Why do you do that?" he asked curiously.

"Do what?" Steve said, turning back to the movie.

"You're beautiful. Why does it embarrass you when someone points it out?"

"How many of those fancy beers did you have?" Steve asked.

"Don't deflect, it's a genuine question."

"Tony, don't," Steve said, quietly and firmly enough that Tony closed his mouth, opened and about to argue. "Just watch the movie."

Onscreen, Cary Grant was charming a rich widow in a casino. Tony settled back, but his eyes drifted up above the movie, where the stars were high and brilliant, brighter by far than they ever got in New York.

He drifted sleepily, half listening to the movie, mostly enjoying the warmth of the southern night and the brief comfort of having nothing to do and nowhere to be, and a mind that wasn't racing along with all the places he could be, the things he could be doing.

He dozed off and on, waking just in time to catch Grace Kelly's blinding gold dress at the end of the film. Steve began paddling them gently towards the side of the pool as she and Cary Grant embraced. While Tony was casting around for a way to get himself and the tablet to dry land without dropping himself in the pool, Steve climbed out, then leaned back in, offering his hand. Tony found himself effortlessly hauled to the side of the pool and put on his feet, steadied by Steve's hand on his arm.

"Bed?" Steve said, as Tony staggered and found his balance.

"Yeah, I think so," Tony agreed, grinning at him. "I'll make you breakfast in the morning."

"Sure, if you're up before noon," Steve replied, sounding indulgent and amused. Tony had meant it as an innuendo, but Steve was a good guy -- that kind of thing flew over his head, and he was probably a better person for it.

Tony barely managed to shrug out of his shirt and peel back the blanket on the bed before he faceplanted into the pillow and dove into the best night of sleep he'd had in months.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Actual naughtiness! Sexy times! I AM SCANDALIZED! - Sci

He woke to the smell of burning sugar.

Not unusual, in and of itself, Steve had found Clint making cinnamon rolls a time or two, early in the morning, sometimes before the sun rose, if it had been a bad night. But for a moment, he wasn't sure where he was, what he was doing here. The huge bed was unfamiliar, the tumble of white sheets and white blankets a strange sort of sea around him.

Then he heard the familiar sound of Tony swearing, and it all came rushing back.

He paused long enough to pull on some light cotton lounge pants (emblazoned, as everything here was, with the StarkIndustries logo down one leg) and a t-shirt, and then he poked his head out of the bedroom. The hallway was full of light, and this time, at least, there was no smoke. Down below him, Tony was talking, the words indistinct, but Steve recognized the tone. Tony was talking to himself.

He headed down the stairs at a quick clip, moving quietly down to the door. Tony was alone in the kitchen, barefoot and dressed in a rumpled t-shirt and lounge pants of his own. His gray t-shirt was had "Property of StarkIndustries Athletic Department" across the chest, and it was splattered with pale beige spots. Tony's hair was a mess, and there was batter on his cheek, a pale drip that seemed obscene .

Steve leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, his head tipped to the side. "Do I want to know what's going on in here?" he asked, trying for a straight face.

"Breakfast," Tony said, as if that was self-explanatory. He waved an expansive hand at the kitchen. "You fed me last night, I'm feeding you this morning."

Steve covered his grin with one hand. "Yeah?" he asked, pushing himself upright. He wandered into the kitchen, watching as Tony opened up a gleaming, industrial sized waffle iron. He poured the batter from a glass measuring cup, and it sizzled as it hit the hot iron.

Steve looked over his shoulder. "Is it supposed to be that-" He paused, looking for the right word. "Lumpy?"

"Probably not!" Tony slammed the lid down. As they watched, waffle batter oozed out of the cracks between the plates, dribbling down to the counter. A thin wisp of smoke curled up. "It'll be fine," Tony said, folding his arms over his chest.

“Uh-huh.” Steve peered at the batter. There were thin threads of something dark in the pale batter, and he leaned forward, his nose wrinkling. “Is that… Did you put chocolate in the waffle mix?”

“You’re going to spoil the surprise,” Tony said. Steve reached for the mixing bowl, and Tony smacked at his hand with the wooden spoon. “Hands off, Cap.”

Laughing, Steve retreated, licking the batter off of the back of his wrist. “What did you do, toss chocolate chunks in there?”

“No, look, just go slice a pineapple or something, make yourself useful in a way that does not involve ruining my culinary surprise, there’s fruit in the fridge, usually I cannot get you to shut up about fruit,” Tony said.

“I do like fruit, and you’ve apparently had a few cups of coffee already,” Steve said, unconcerned about the manic light in Tony’s eyes. He headed to the fridge. “You understand that if I cut up fruit, that means you’ve got to eat it.”

“Chewing is an annoyance, toss it in the blender for me.”

“I know you’re on vacation, but you know what? I think even you can manage chewing.” Steve pulled out a cutting board and retrieved a knife from the block. The smell of burnt sugar was heavy in the air now, and he paused to open up the patio doors. Just in case.

By the time he finished chopping up a pineapple, a papaya and a mango, Tony was prying the first waffle off of the waffle iron. It stuck more than it should have, but Tony managed to get it onto a plate. “Here we go,” he crowed. “Waffle with sea salt caramel and chocolate!”

Steve blinked. “You put caramels in there?”

“You like caramel.”

“I like a lot of things that don’t belong in waffles,” Steve pointed out, smiling. Tony waved off the objections, grinning as he dropped the plate onto the table.

“You’ll like this, too.” The smile he offered Steve was warm and boyish, and there was waffle batter on the exposed line of his collarbone, and in the dark stubble on his jaw. “Well?”

Steve opened his mouth. Shut it. Stared down at the waffle, which was liberally marked with slick spots of chocolate and caramel. “Looks great,” he said.

Tony considered it, his hands on his hips. “It does. I’ll get the syrup.”

“I really don’t think this needs any more more sugar,” Steve said.

“How would you know, you haven’t even tasted it yet.”

“That’s- That’s a point.” Steve lowered himself into the chair, keeping a wary eye on the waffle the whole time. By the time that Tony had returned, Steve had a piece of it on the tines

of his fork. Caramel dripped down to the table.

Tony plopped down next to him. “Well?” he repeated, grinning.

Steve glanced at him, and he looked so darn hopeful that there really wasn’t anything else he could do. He ate it. It took an inordinate amount of chewing, but he managed to swallow. He nodded. “It’s inedible,” he said.

Tony reached for the plate. “You are a wuss.”

“No,” Steve said, fending him off with a fork. “No, don’t you, no!”

Laughing, Tony grabbed for the waffle. “Captain America is a wuss!” he yelled, managing to get hold of a corner. “Give it up-”

“No, don’t you dare,” Steve said, laughing too. “Only the serum is keeping me from spontaneously developing diabetes, Stark, you-” He gave up on getting the waffle away from Tony and just grabbed the other edge. It ripped in half, and Steve grabbed for the chunk in Tony’s hand. “You will die!”

Tony shoved it in his mouth. “Ha!” he said, his cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk’s. He looked so ridiculous that Steve collapsed back into his seat, laughing too hard to even try any more. As he watched, Tony tried to chew, and his expression of smug victory melting into confusion, and then disgust. He got up so fast that he overturned his chair and shot for the garbage can.

“How did you see this working out?” Steve asked, his cheeks wet with tears. “Oh, God, Tony, how- How did you think this was going to work, you idiot?”

“That is vile,” Tony said. He glared at the waffle iron, as if it was responsible for the outcome. “That is-” He gargled with a mouthful of coffee, which just made Steve laugh harder.

Steve reached for the waffle. “God, I l-” Catching himself, almost too late, he ground to a sudden and obvious halt. To cover it, he ripped off another chunk and tucked it into his mouth.

“Don’t eat that,” Tony said. He stared down at the waffle batter, his coffee cup held like talisman between it and him.

“It’s not that bad,” Steve said, grinning. And once he got used to the sharp taste of burnt sugar over more sugar, it really wasn’t. There was chocolate on his fingers, and he stuck them in his mouth, sucking it off without thinking. Tony stared at him, his expression unreadable, and Steve grinned at him. “It’s not,” he said, drawing the flat of his tongue over the pad of his thumb, then sucking it into his mouth. “A little too much chocolate, but I like chocolate.”

Tony shifted his weight, leaning back against the counters. “I tried,” he said, his eyes focused on the window now, avoiding Steve’s eyes.

“I appreciate it,” Steve said. He stood up. “Been a long time since anyone made me breakfast.” Since Bucky, probably. And Bucky had never been a cheerful sort in the morning, more often than not, a slice of bread or bun, maybe a boiled egg, if there was one to be had, made up their breakfasts. He shook his head, shaking off the maudlin thoughts at the same time. “It was nice of you.”

Tony glanced at him. “Yeah?” he asked, his eyebrows arched.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. He took another bite of the waffle and reached for the can of waffle mix. “Wanna try a batch without the… Add-ins?”

Tony dumped the batter into the trash. “Can’t be worse,” he said.

“Can’t be,” Steve agreed, smiling at him. There was batter on Tony’s cheek was making him insane, and without thinking about it, he reached out, wiping it away with a swipe of his thumb. Too late, he realized how intimate the gesture was, his hand jerking back. “You’re a mess,” he said, when Tony blinked at him.

“Thought you figured that out a while back,” Tony said, He tossed Steve an egg and Steve caught it. “Let’s go. I’m hungry.”

*

"Do you suppose there's any fishing worth a damn around here?" Steve asked, as they were finishing the (actually, decently edible) non-caramel waffles from the second batch. Tony slid the last of his waffle around in a puddle of syrup, considering it.

"Since when do you fish?" he asked.

"I don't, but I wouldn't mind learning. Never spent much time in the south that wasn't spent on a stage hawking bonds."

"Mostly boat fishing, I think. Swordfish, shark, maybe some tuna? I dunno, Florida's not really my ecosystem." Tony shrugged. "There's probably gear around, if you want to try surf fishing. Or we could call over to the mainland to get a boat."

"No, that's fine. I'm enjoying the quiet," Steve said.

"I'm shocked."

"Just because *some* of us don't like rock played at glass-shattering levels," Steve replied, setting his plate and silverware in the sink, sucking a stray spot of maple syrup off the knuckles of his left hand. Tony was almost sure he wasn't doing it on purpose, but not completely sure, because he couldn't fathom how a bright guy like Steve could be so completely oblivious to how that looked. Tony wondered idly if he'd always had a mouth like that, or if the serum had just needlessly pouted up his lips.

Well, maybe not needlessly, but certainly that was an enhancement more suited to a lover than a fighter --

Christ, what was he thinking? Staring at Steve's mouth like some kind of horny college freshman.

"Tony?" Steve asked, and Tony twitched, blinking. Steve grinned. "Were you in an Engineer Trance again?"

"A what?"

"Haven't you heard Pepper call it that?"

"Pepper call what," Tony repeated, bewildered now.

"Your engineer trance. You know, where you check out because you're building the future in your mind." Steve pointed at his own head. "Very awkward when it happens at dinner, y'know."

"I'm a billionaire, when I do something awkward it's just eccentric," Tony said absently. "No, I was uh. Working out what I was going to do today."

The wording on that, he reflected, was thoroughly eccentric, given what his actual thoughts had been.

"And?"

"Haven't decided yet. Maybe just lay out by the pool again," Tony said with a smirk. Steve shifted uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his head.

"Maybe we could have a look at the island," he said. "You know, walk down the beach, see how far it goes."

"Patrolling the perimeter?" Tony asked, smirk widening.

"No!" Steve protested. "Just exploring a little. Shame to own a whole island and not know what's around the bend of the beach. It can't even be that big, we could probably do the entire loop by early afternoon."

"That sounds suspiciously like physical exertion. I came here to avoid that."

"You came here to avoid the news media."

"I can multitask," Tony said.

"Aw, c'mon Tony. It'll be a nice walk. We can take lunch," Steve said, a pleading smile on his face. "I'll make the sandwiches. You walk all over in Manhattan."

"I have admiring fans in Manhattan," Tony pointed out. "Also there are pretzel carts."

"I'll bring pretzels."

Tony rolled his eyes. "You are five. Fine, it's like taking a Great Dane for a walk, I will go with you on this insane voyage."

Steve's face lit up. "Okay, so go get dressed, I'll make lunch. Is there a basket anywhere?"

"How would I know? Probably somewhere. Your job now," Tony informed him. Steve didn't seem to care; when Tony left to change, he was pulling sandwich fixings out of the fridge, humming to himself.

He took longer to dress than usual. It seemed a little more important today, for some reason he didn't want to examine too closely. By the time he'd settled on a pair of loose linen pants and a plain red shirt and returned to the kitchen, Steve was putting waxed-paper packets into, incredibly, an actual picnic basket. Tony craned his neck and saw a couple of bottles of iced tea already strapped into the basket. And a bag of pretzels.

"Ready?" Steve asked, as he placed the last packet into the basket and closed the lid.

"Let the patrol commence," Tony said. Steve snorted, but he was still smiling as they walked out into the sunshine and down to the beach.

Tony had to admit that he was going to have to look up how he'd acquired the island and either feel smug at his own good taste or compliment Pepper (again) on hers. It was pretty, and still almost completely wild. The beach ended eventually in a rising cliff that would protect the villa from storms sweeping in off the Atlantic, and along the edge of the cliff there was something resembling a trail, ill-kept but not entirely grown over. Steve forged ahead, more like a giant, excited dog than even Tony had been expecting, pushing low limbs and plant fronds out of the way, once in a while doubling back if Tony, dawdling, fell too far behind. The occasional bird-call or rustle in the underbrush said the island wasn't entirely uninhabited, and the water below the cliff looked deep enough that there probably would be good fishing if he brought a boat out. Not that he was a fishing kind of guy, but SI had suppliers or clients who were, and hosting them here wasn't an entirely bad idea.

"Bet I could dive from here," Steve said thoughtfully, and Tony's attention snapped back to him.

"From here," he repeated. They were at the highest point of the cliff, at least that was visible; maybe forty feet up. Ahead, it sloped down sharply, back into a narrow strip of beach at the southwestern tip of the island. Steve was standing just back from the sheer drop, studying it carefully.

"Sure," Steve said, setting the basket down and leaning out over the edge. "Water looks deep enough. I've jumped from higher." He glanced back at Tony, grinning. "So have you."

"Thrown," Tony corrected. "I have been *thrown from* higher. I'm not eager to repeat the experience without a suit handy."

"You never did cliff diving? Seems like something you'd do."

"My self-destructive risk taking generally involves cars or explosives." Tony cocked his head, curiously. "Are you going to -- are you going to dive right now?"

"Considering it." Steve shaded his eyes. "If I dove here, I could get around the curve and up to the beach easily enough."

"I feel obligated to remind you of the youtube video Clint made us all watch of that guy who cliff-dived right into a shark."

Steve's grin was predatory. "Too bad we didn't bring a camera. Meet you on the beach?"

"Are you -- okay then," Tony said, as Steve shed his shirt and laid it on top of the picnic basket. The sandals he'd scrounged from somewhere followed, and he tightened the drawstring on what Tony only now was realizing were swim trunks, not shorts. "We should maybe double-check the depth of the -- "

Steve, with a roar, ran the last few steps to the cliff and went over, body flung out straight like an arrow. Tony leaned over the edge and saw him roll into and twist out of a somersault, knifing into the surf with nearly no splash.

He surfaced a good thirty seconds later, hair a dark gold blotch in the blue water, and looked up, waving. Tony rolled his eyes, even if he was too far up for Steve to see, and picked up the basket, setting off down the switchbacks cut into the cliff and then the dirt below, reaching the top of the beach just as Steve came dripping out of the surf.

"Get your thrill buzz for the day?" Tony asked, flopping down on the sand and opening the basket.

"Coulda punched a shark or two," Steve replied, grinning, and caught the iced tea Tony tossed him. "Closest some of us get to flying, you know," he said, settling next to Tony. Feet dug into the sand, damp and wearing only a pair of floral swim trunks, he looked like a surf bum -- or maybe, more accurately, like a model pretending to be a surf bum. Either way, he seemed a little lighter than he had.

"No reason you couldn't ask for an armor. Or a flight rig like Sam's," Tony pointed out. "I'd build you one if you wanted."

"Nah. I wasn't made for that," Steve said, resting his elbows on his knees. "Besides, that'd take the fun out of it. If you have to do something all the time, it's a job -- even if you love it," he added, as Tony opened his mouth to object that he *liked* zooming through the sky in a suit of cherry-red armor. "Taking me a little while to learn that not everything has to be my job."

Tony nodded. He was still working on that one himself. Probably some kind of complex endemic to superheroes.

"So, you want ham or turkey?" Steve asked, leaning across him to dig in the picnic basket.

*

“This is almost familiar,” Steve said, around a mouthful of turkey and cheese. His head tipped up, towards the sun, and he let his eyes fall shut. The crash of surf, the feeling of salt water drying on his skin to a faint prickly itch, the picnic lunch, all of that was familiar, to a certain extent. “I mean, if I can convince myself that I’m back on Coney Island, instead of a deserted island somewhere in the caribbean.”

“It’s not deserted,” Tony said, and Steve opened his mouth in time to catch his grin. “I’m right here. The guy that owns the island.” He tipped the bottle of ice tea to his mouth, his lips red against the glass. His head went back when he swallowed, and Steve watched his throat work as his swallowed.

Steve’s sandwich was dry in his mouth, when he remembered to swallow.

“Besides,” Tony said, his tongue darting out to lick at his lips, “are you seriously comparing a tropical paradise with one of the most crowded tourist traps in the Western Hemisphere?”

“Comparing, and finding it lacking,” Steve said, mostly to see the look of horrified betrayal that slid over Tony’s face. Steve grinned at him, loving how easy it was to get a rise out of the man. “This place is missing a few amenities, Tony.”

“I am looking forward to hearing what, exactly, you think that it could use.” Tony leaned an elbow on one upthrust knee, his cheek braced on his knuckles. His mouth pursed, his eyes narrowed, he just stared at Steve, waiting.

“Well,” Steve mused, gesturing in Tony’s direction with the remains of his sandwich, “I could use a hot dog.”

Tony grinned at him. “Yeah, well, I’ll make it up to you when we get home.”

Steve’s eyebrows arched. “You offering to take me out to Nathan’s?” Even as the words slipped past his lips, he was cursing himself. “I mean, not take me out, I mean, go out with-” He felt his face heat, and hoped that the sun covered his blush. “You know what I mean.”

“I will absolutely take you out to Nathan’s,” Tony said, chuckling under his breath. “God, Rogers, you’re a damn cheap date, you know that?”

“Just for that,” Steve said, between bites of his sandwich, “you can buy.”

“I think I can afford that.” Tony finished his iced tea and tossed the bottle back in the picnic hamper. “I draw the line at hanging out on the beach at Coney Island, though. I prefer my sunbathing with a bit more privacy. And personal space.”

Steve told himself that he absolutely should not be thinking of Tony’s well tanned ass at this point. “I don’t know,” he said, leaning back on his elbows to avoid meeting Tony’s eyes, “I think you’d fit right in on the boardwalk.” He struggled against a smile. “Lots of characters there.”

“Just for that,” Tony said, mimicking Steve’s stern tones, “you can buy your own fries.”

“Why would I do that? Even if I order them, you’re the one that always ends up eating ‘em,” Steve said.

“But the calories don’t count if they’re your fries,” Tony said. He flopped out on the sand next to Steve, his arms folded behind his head, his whole body arching in a slow stretch that pulled his shirt tight across his chest. “Not all of us have a super soldier metabolism.”

“Or that unique grasp of logic,” Steve agreed. He dug his heels into the sand. “You could work off a few of those calories now, you know.”

“I could,” Tony said, the words ending in a broad yawn, “but a nap sounds like a better plan.”

Steve grinned at him, his chest aching with something he chose to call affection. Affection was appropriate and acceptable and he could deal with affection. “Oh, it does?”

Tony’s eyes were already shut, his long dark lashes lying heavy over his cheeks. “It does.” His lips turned up in a wicked smile. “Try it. Bet you’ll like it.”

“I’m not sure I should buy into this laziness.”

Tony kicked in his general direction. “Quiet. I’m napping.”

Laughing under his breath, Steve lounged back against the sand, his eyes closing.

He wasn’t sure if he actually slept, or if he just allowed himself to rest, but when he opened his eyes again, the sun was lower on the horizon, and the waves were creeping up the sand towards them. They crashed against the shore, and Steve pushed himself up.

“Hey,” Steve said, running a hand through his hair. “Tony.”

Tony made a noise, almost but not quite a word, a soft exhale of a sound that sent a shiver along Steve’s back. He leaned over. “Tony,” he repeated, trying to sound stern. But even to his own ears, it was just filled with amusement and affection. Tony smiled, his eyes still closed, his breathing soft and even.

Shaking his head with a smile that felt far too fond, Steve reached out. “You’ve slept for long enough, you idiot,” he said, his hand closing on Tony’s shoulder, giving him a small shake.

Tony rolled over, towards Steve, his face bumping up against the side of Steve’s leg. With a muted mumble, he threw his arm over Steve’s lap. Steve froze, his mouth going dry in an instant. His hand, frozen in mid air, clutched at nothing, and then slowly came down to rest on Tony’s head. Beneath his palm, Tony’s dark hair was soft, the strands tangling around Steve’s fingers.

He waited, his breath stilled in his throat, but Tony didn’t move, didn’t even stir. Steve stroked the hair away from Tony’s forehead, letting the cool breeze push it back. He shouldn’t do it, and he knew it, but somehow, it seemed perfectly natural, perfectly fine, to sit on the damp sand, listening to the surf crash, and savoring the warmth of the sun on his face.

The tide was coming in now, the waves crashing against the sand closer and closer to their feet, and Steve lifted his hand from Tony's hair. He missed the contact almost immediately, but he stifled the thought. It was harder to stifle the rush of need that curled in the pit of his stomach, something hotter and richer than desire, than want.

Something that wanted nothing more than to stay here, right in this moment.

He gave Tony's shoulder another shake "Okay, Stark, time to go, before you end up lost at sea. I tried that once, trust me, you won't like it. The wi-fi's non-existent."

Tony muttered something, rolling over onto his back, and Steve grinned down at him. Bracing one hand on the sand, he leaned over Tony. "C'mon, Tony. Wake up."

His eyes opened, just a bit, those remarkable eyelashes flicking upwards. He stared up at Steve, his eyes dark and heavy with sleep. He smiled, slow and sly, and Steve's breath caught in his throat.

"Hey, Cap," he whispered, and then his fingers hooked hooked in the neck of Steve's t-shirt. Steve had a moment to realize what was happening, and then Tony was dragging him down.

He could've fought it, he could've pulled away without much effort, but he wanted this. He'd always wanted this, and he was sick of fighting it.

The kiss was awkward and stumbling, noses and chins bumping, but Tony's lips were warm and soft, flavored with salt spray. His fingers slid into Steve's hair, tangling with the strands as he deepened the kiss, and Steve sank into it, unresisting.

The kiss was too hesitant to be fulfilling, and too filled with need to be sweet, but when they finally broke apart, Steve was gasping for breath. His hand was braced on Tony's stomach, his fingers latched onto the fabric there, and he felt Tony's muscles go tense beneath his grip.

"Uh," Steve said, because he was a complete and utter idiot.

Tony's eyes snapped open, suddenly wide awake. He gaped up at Steve, his lips parted, his breath coming in quick gasps. "Oh, fuck," he said, and Steve couldn't hold back a bark of laughter. "Jesus, sorry, I was asleep, I thought I was dreaming, I-" His words stumbled to a halt, his face bright red, and his fingers were still in Steve's hair, his eyes were still wide, his pupils huge.

Steve stared down at him, his heart pounding. He wondered if Tony had dreams like this often. Steve did. So it was kind of nice to think that he might not be the only one. "Well," he said, his voice soft, "You're awake now. So-" His face felt like it was on fire, and he stumbled forward, the words awkward in his throat. "Wanna try that again?"

*

There were about a dozen alarms going off in Tony's head at once, ranging from "gonna ruin the Avengers" to "gonna ruin Steve" to "he's gonna think I did all this on purpose" to "Pepper's gonna murder me".

The last wasn't really true. Pepper didn't care who he went out with as long as it didn't impact the stock value. But whenever the rest of the alarms went off, the murdered-by-Pepper alarm went off. Gears were grinding, steam blowing, cars banging into each other in his head and then --

Steve said, "Wanna try that again?" and everything went completely silent.

"Huh?" asked Tony Stark, smooth seducer of all who crossed his path.

Steve got the same look he got whenever someone made a joke he didn't get, and he started to withdraw, so Tony did the only thing that made sense in the remarkable silence of his mind, and twisted his hand tight in Steve's shirt, pulling him down again.

Steve's teeth caught briefly in his lip, but then he tilted his head just enough and the kiss turned deep and thrilling, definitely top ten for first kisses even if it was the second, and Tony grabbed Steve's shoulder with his other hand --

Steve made a noise, desperate and high in the back of his throat, and Tony chased it until suddenly Steve jerked away. Tony pushed himself up on one elbow in time to see Steve roll off and tug his shirtsleeve up, looking down in horror at his deep red skin.

Tony looked closer -- lucid now, and not full of terror and arousal -- and there it was: a bright red sunburn across Steve's forehead and throat, streaks of it on his cheeks, his nose and the tips of his ears burnished and shining. Curious, Tony looked down at Steve's legs and found a pale patch where he'd been lying on top of him, down to the outline of his hair across one thigh.

"Irish skin!" he heard himself say. "Sunblock! There's a hole in the ozone layer now, Steve, you have to wear sunblock!"

"Jesus!" Steve said, looking at his red arms, the pale undersides that hadn't caught any sun.

"You're like the Hulk of sunburns, oh my God," Tony managed, and fell into semi-crazed laughter. He felt a little overwrought, like maybe one too many things had happened to him at once, and he wasn't even the one with the sunburn.

Steve creakily managed to get to his feet, stripping off his shirt, trying to keep it from touching his skin. The sun had gone right through the thin fabric.

"News for you," Tony said, around his laughter, "that won't make it better."

"Just -- just shut up and get up, wouldja," Steve said, looking put out. "It'll fade once I get out of the sun. I don't know, first goddamn kiss I've had in months, first time you've shown any actual interest, and the damn sunburn..."

He was already wandering up the beach, muttering to himself with the peculiar part-delirium of someone who probably had crank from heatstroke. Tony scrambled up, considered grabbing the picnic basket, decided fuck the picnic basket, and caught up to him up the cliff, under a canopy of trees.

"Okay, this is okay, I've seen you fade back to painfully pale, this won't take long," he said, trotting to keep up. "Steve, Jesus, I can't believe I'm the one saying this to you, *calm down*."

Steve stopped, took a deep breath, let his shoulders drop. "I've had enough people laugh at me."

"Laugh at -- wow. No. That's not what happened just n -- well okay yes, but not -- forgive me for finding the whole situation a little amusing!"

Steve turned to him, eyes angry-bright in his *still hilariously sunburned* face. "Sorry it's not as funny to me that I thought you were being serious."

Tony gaped at him. "What part of 'I thought I was having a sex dream with Steve and really into it' didn't register with you? I was laughing at the sunburn. Not at you. Not at kissing you," he added, and leaned in carefully, touching his lips to Steve's, pulling away just enough to entice him in closer. Steve huffed, and before Tony could stop him, slid an arm around his waist --

"Son of a -- " Steve broke off, tugging his arm away and shaking it. "That really hurts."

"If only the world could see Captain America now," Tony said, patting him very gently on the inside of his arm. "It's shade most of the way back to the villa. Let's just...walk and...talk."

The quiet, once Tony suggested they talk, was awkward, but at least it was short-lived. Steve cleared his throat after about two minutes of uncomfortable silence and walking.

"Sorry I over-reacted," he said, glancing sidelong at Tony as if to gauge his reaction. "I don't...well, for a long time, getting laughed at wasn't a good thing. I mean, you're not wrong, you know, about what I do, the thrill-seeking thing, it's just...for so long I could do so little. Sometimes I feel like I can do anything, and I can't see any reason I shouldn't. But with people...when I was little I could tell myself they just weren't seeing me, that they'd like me if they knew me. Now I don't exactly have that excuse. When I get knocked back it's twice as hard, and I was never any good at it to begin with."

"Is that why you never..." Tony said, making a gesture that even he realized was probably incomprehensible.

"Never...?" Steve asked, looking confused.

"Well, it's not like you date a lot. You never bring anyone home. I would imagine it's hard to take a risk."

"Keeping an eye on my love life, Tony?" Steve asked. At least he sounded amused instead of offended.

"I keep an eye on everyone's love life. It's a hobby," Tony answered loftily.

"Uh huh." Steve pushed a branch out of the way on the path, then winced when it brushed against his shoulder.

"Nice dodge on the question there, by the way," Tony added.

"Thank you." Steve shrugged. "I don't know how you do it, that's all."

"Do what?"

"Oh, you always -- " Steve seemed to realize what he was about to say, and broke off abruptly. Tony fought down a smile. "I mean not *always*. But it's so effortless. If you want someone, I mean for God's sake, if you want someone to go naked sunbathing with you or fly to a tropical island, you just...get what you want. I wish I knew how."

"Practice, and a total lack of shame," Tony said. "It's just salesmanship, it rarely means anything."

"Rarely?"

"Sometimes it does," Tony said, and managed to hold Steve's hopeful look for a moment. "Usually when it does I'm a lot less smooth."

Steve smiled shyly, walking a little faster. The villa was in view, now, and with the dark deepening over the ocean to the east, it was hard to tell where the island ended and the water began. Tony wasn't used to particularly philosophical observations like that; there was something in the air here, maybe.

He glanced at Steve, who still had a smile on his face, and began formulating something approaching a plan.

*

He was an idiot. But he wasn’t a rejected idiot. Steve was trying to focus on the positive.

The lights flickered on as they approached the villa, casting the pool and patio in diffused light. It was soft and easy and Steve told himself not to think of it as romantic.

Tony caught him by the waistband, drawing him to a halt. “This way,” he said, his head tipping towards the cabana beside the pool. Steve gave him a questioning look, but Tony just grinned at him. “C’mon, Rogers, trust me for once.”

“That’s never worked out well for me,” Steve said, even as he fell into step with Tony. “Isn’t trusting you how I ended up on this desert island?”

Tony chuckled. “Nice. Don’t make it easy for me, Cap.” His fingers dipped below the fabric of Steve’s waistband, his knuckles pressing against Steve’s hipbone. Steve shivered, the sensation like a chill on his skin. He sucked in a breath, trying to stabilize his breathing.

Tony pushed the drape of fabric that served as the door out of the way, tugging Steve inside. “Sit,” he said, his hand slipping free of Steve’s pants to point at the daybed. Steve told himself he didn’t miss the warmth, even as he lowered himself carefully onto the plush white surface. The fabric was cool under his skin, and he rubbed idly at his burned forearm,

checking to see if the skin was going to peel. It stung, more than he expected, and he hissed out a breath that might've been a curse.

"Will you stop?" Tony was digging in a drawer of the nearby bureau. "Your poor abused Irish skin. Your ancestors couldn't even imagine sun like this existed, no wonder you share a shade or two with the armor right now." He slammed the drawer shut with his hip, even as he popped the top of bottle of aloe vera after sun gel. "Here."

Steve reached for the bottle, and Tony held it out of reach. Steve couldn't hold back a smile, even as it made his face ache. "So you just got it out to taunt me with it?" he asked.

"You're just going to make it worse." Tony poured a healthy portion into the cup of his palm before setting the bottle within easy reach. "Relax. This isn't my first time at the sunburn rodeo."

Naked sunbathing led to sunburns, Steve supposed, so that was probably true. Tony was rubbing his hands together, spreading the gel over his fingers. "Doesn't that defeat the purpose?" Steve asked.

"Don't doubt the master, Cap." Tony leaned over, his body casting a shadow over Steve's face. The lights outside were defused by the white, gauzy fabric that formed the sides of the cabana. Still plenty of light to see, but dim enough to give the impression of the coming night. Steve was so busy thinking about it that he almost missed the first touch of Tony's fingers on his shoulder.

The sensation of those gel covered fingers sliding over his skin, sapping the heat and relieving the pain, was such a relief that he let out a short, choked off moan of pleasure. Embarrassed, he tried to pull away, but Tony was grinning, his eyes half closed, his fingers still moving. "I'd like you to know," he said, his voice husky and warm, "that this is the reaction I deserve all the time. I am expecting it, from now on, when I pat your shoulder or shake your hand or hand you a cup and our fingers brush, I now fully expect you to make that kind of a-"

"Shut UP, Stark," Steve said, and he was grinning like an idiot now, his body relaxing under Tony's touch. His head fell forward, and then back, as Tony's fingers slid over his shoulder, along the plane of his chest. His palm slid over Steve's nipple, and Steve's whole body jerked, his shoulders snapping back with a harsh indrawn breath.

"Sorry," Tony said, and he did not sound sorry at all. Steve considered calling him on it, but really, all he wanted to do was lean into Tony's touch and whimper. The absence of pain was staggering, and now he was acutely aware of every burned inch of skin that Tony hadn't tended to. He moved when Tony moved him, when his hands slid along the back of Steve's neck, over the planes of his shoulderblades. He leaned forward so Tony could reach his back, then back again, resting his weight on his hands so Tony could pour gel onto his arms, his chest, the hollow of his stomach.

Steve was aware of his erection, the need hard and sharp, pleasure swirling in his head as he struggled to breathe, to keep his hips on the bed. Tony's fingers curled around his sides, up the slope of his ribs, stroking gently against the abused skin. His hands were warm and cool,

all at once, as he smoothed the gel over Steve's arms, ignoring the way the muscles tensed under his touch.

It should've been humiliating, how much he WANTED right now, but somehow, he couldn't work up the strength to care. But when Tony's fingers brushed, feather light against Steve's throat, Steve jerked backwards. Somehow, that, of all things, felt far too intimate.

His eyes flew open, and Tony was smiling at him. "Still too hot?" he asked, and his voice was rough now, rough and a step lower than Steve had ever heard it. "Sorry."

Steve opened his mouth, about to tell him it was all right, trying to find the words to tell him not to stop without resorting to begging, but before he could, Tony leaned in. "Head up," he said, and when Steve did as he was told, Tony blew a soft breath into the hollow of his throat.

Steve nearly went through the roof. The sound he made was perilously close to a whine, his whole body arching up off the bed. "Is that-" he managed before he had to stop. Tony blew against the side of his neck, and Steve's fingers dug into the day bed. "Is this supposed to help?"

"You seem much happier," Tony said, and this time, he followed the soft puff of air with gel slick fingers. Steve exhaled, his head spinning.

He barely noticed Tony's thumb smoothing over his cheekbone, over the line of his jaw and the curve of his ear. But the soft stroke of a finger over the bridge of his nose brought his eyes open. Tony's cheeks were flushed, his pupils blown wide, but his breathing was steady as he rubbed his index finger against Steve's nose. "Almost done," he whispered. "Close your eyes."

Steve did as he was told, and felt the flick of finger tips against the soft skin of his eyelids. When Tony's hands pulled away, the loss was painful. "Missed a spot," he managed, his eyes still closed.

"Yeah? Where?"

Steve screwed up his courage and tapped a fingertip against his lips. "Here."

"Aloe doesn't taste good, Steve."

Steve opened his eyes. "No, but you do."

*

"That," Tony said, wiping the last of the aloe off on his arm and propping himself over Steve, "was a truly dreadful line. Worthy of Clint. Worthy of *me.*"

Steve looked like he was mentally floating, probably a combination of the relief from pain and all the touching. Steve wasn't particularly tactile, but perhaps that was a problem. Something to be addressed some other time -- or rather, addressed now, studied in depth later. Tony rubbed a stray streak of aloe along the skin under his lower lip, and Steve's mouth

curved up in a goofy smile. Tony very carefully lowered himself down, kissing him, their lips their only point of contact for now.

Steve whined softly and opened his mouth, and Tony tilted his head forward for better leverage, the mild, summery smell of the lotion filling his nostrils as it encompassed them both. One of Steve's hands rested gently on the back of his neck, fingertips brushing his hair against the grain.

He pulled back, catching his breath. "Better?" he asked, amused.

"Getting there," Steve said. "This is a lot better than walking and talking."

"It'll be better than cliff diving soon," Tony told him. Steve tugged him back down, his other hand sliding up under Tony's shirt in back, fingertips digging into his spine. It was -- interesting, kissing this way, bodies held apart, both of them cautious and slow. Steve's eyes were wide and dark, and he blinked slowly, moved slowly all over. The red was already fading from his face, darkening to tan that would probably pale again in an hour or two. Tony kissed under his jaw, where the sun hadn't quite reached, avoiding the still-sensitive breadth of his throat.

"Jesus, Tony," Steve murmured, tipping his head back. "The things you do to me."

"Just the start," Tony assured him.

Steve grunted softly as Tony nipped the edge of his jaw. "Not quite what I meant."

"Mm?" Tony leaned back a little, cocking his head. "What did you mean?"

Steve's hands worked his shirt up, so Tony sat up enough to tug it off; before he'd even thrown it aside, Steve's hands were on his hips, tugging the waistband down just enough to reach the top of his thighs.

"Tanned," he said softly, thumbs pressing in.

"Told you, it's those good Mediterranean genes -- "

"All over," Steve said. "I saw -- in the decontam, I saw you were tanned. Everywhere. I didn't mean to look, I just -- and after that I couldn't stop thinking..."

"Louisiana was a good time," Tony said, but he didn't really want to discuss naked sunbathing somewhere else when Steve was right here, laid out for him, shiny with lotion. "This is better."

"Good," Steve said, with a hint of fierceness, and pushed up off the bed to kiss him again. Tony stroked fingertips up his arms, testing, and when Steve didn't flinch, he gripped his forearms and pulled them over his shoulders. Steve took the hint and tugged him gently, pulling him into his lap --

And then hissed as Tony knelt over his thighs.

"Sorry -- " Tony rose up, but Steve shook his head and pulled him in closer.

"Wasn't the sunburn," he said, and Tony became aware of his erection, hot against his thigh, even through his pants and Steve's swimsuit. Steve rolled his hips a little, and his skin was still too warm under Tony's thighs but if he didn't care, Tony wasn't going to object. Steve's hands slid down, palms cupping his ass, hands rubbing up and down in small circles. Apparently he really had enjoyed the all-over tan, or at least it had stayed in his mind. Tony leaned in and carefully pressed his face to Steve's throat, and Steve whimpered at the brush of his beard on skin.

"Too much?"

"S'fine," Steve's throat vibrated against his cheek, voice deep even for him. "I, um."

Tony returned to his mouth, licking into it, drawing Steve into a deep, messy kiss. "Hey, is this okay?" he asked, because clearly he was an idiot who was going to give Steve way more chances to back out than any sensible person would.

"Yeah," Steve breathed, eyes flicking over his face intently. "Can we, can we just -- this is nice, can we do this for a while?"

"Well, I don't know if you've noticed, but we have literally nowhere we need to be," Tony said, lightly running his hands up and down Steve's arms. "Your call, Red."

"That's funny," Steve told him gravely. He leaned up to kiss him, seemingly content with that, and more than willing to let Tony run things for a little while. Tony tried to keep him distracted with kisses as his hands drifted across warm skin, testing for tenderness, working the last of the aloe into gradually relaxing muscles. Steve still tasted like salt and heat, and he was obscenely responsive, especially when Tony slid a palm over his nipple, a light touch that still elicited an intense response.

Tony grinned against his mouth. "Sensitive, or tender?"

"I -- ah!" Steve twitched when Tony did it again. "Sensitive? Never really paid much attention..."

"You are now," Tony observed, shuffling in a little closer. "Ready for a little more?"

"Like what?" Steve breathed, as if he couldn't quite believe they'd even come this far.

"Whatever you want. Or we can keep doing this, if you want."

Steve looked stubborn. "What do you want?"

Tony bit down on an exasperated reply, and instead decided honesty might be the best policy here. "I want to watch you fall apart," he said, pressing both hands to Steve's abdomen, fingers curling in. "I want to get you right up to the edge and keep you there until you barely remember your own name. There is a *lot* I want to do with you. But I am getting," he continued, lowering his tone, "that maybe you need to go a little slower than that. So talk to me, here. Tell me what you want."

Steve kissed him, which as a distraction was pretty excellent, but also fairly obvious. Tony was about to point this out when Steve lifted one of his hands by the wrist and guided it down between them, past his erection, sliding along the slick fabric of his swimsuit --

"Ah," Tony said with a grin, pressing his fingers in gently. "Show not tell, huh? Okay. You sure?"

Steve nodded against his cheek. "I'd like it."

"Me too. I think..." Tony pulled away and swung his legs off the day-bed, going to the shelf nearby. He rummaged in the first-aid kit, then held up his prize with a cry of triumph.

"Is that -- uh -- medical lubricant?" Steve asked hoarsely.

"Which means it's both sterile and safe for internal use, unlike the aloe," Tony said. "No condoms, though."

"I can't carry anything, or get anything," Steve said.

"Rather not test that, actually, but I've been tested recently, so we should be fine," Tony replied, turning around just as Steve let the swimsuit fall to the ground next to the bed. He paused, because some feats of science did really deserve a few seconds of silent appreciation, and Steve's body reclining in front of him was one of those feats. The red on Steve's face currently didn't have much to do with sunburn at all. Tony hurried out of the rest of his clothes and climbed back on the bed before Steve could decide this was a bad idea.

Which was when his mouth betrayed him, because he had to ask, "Are you sure? This can be kind of -- "

"Not my first time," Steve interrupted. Tony paused.

"Really?" he asked, intrigued.

"Well -- " Steve's momentary facade creaked a little. "With someone else, yes."

"Good God," Tony managed, imagination running wild. Steve, alone, opening himself up, the look on his face --

He skidded back a little, pulling Steve's legs out from under his until he was kneeling between them, Steve rising up on his elbows to watch. Tony tore the edge off the lubricant, spilling some onto his fingers, then set it down and used his hand to push Steve's thigh up and out -- sparing a second to appreciate the flexibility of a twentysomething super-soldier -- before bending his neck, taking the head of Steve's cock in his mouth.

"Tony!" Steve said, sounding strangled, but one large hand twisted in Tony's hair, not pulling him off, so Tony smiled as best he could and went a little deeper. He stroked over Steve's ass with a finger, slicking it, then took more of him as he slipped inside. Steve let out a soft, almost relieved breath, and then a groan when Tony hollowed his cheeks. His fingers tightened against Tony's scalp.

Tony worked slowly, aware not only that Steve was sounding *surprised* by how good it felt but also that one hard buck of his hips would cause a choking fit that would probably ruin the moment. Steve was already almost incoherent above him, fragments of sentences breaking off for groans whenever Tony moved, and a growl of frustration the one time he stopped. He was big enough that even shallow thrusts threatened to cut off Tony's air, which was a shock of pleasure every time -- if he had a hand free, Tony wasn't sure he could have resisted getting himself off, so it was just as well he was occupied.

Steve tugged on his hair after a few minutes, and Tony raised his head, licking his lips. Steve stared at him, eyes huge.

"Please," Steve murmured, pulling a little harder, guiding Tony up his body. He moved as far as he could, fingers still inside Steve, opening him up, but it was far enough for Steve to bend in for a kiss. And, with Steve's chest supporting him, he had one hand free to brush a rough palm over Steve's nipple, which made him yelp in surprise.

"You're so responsive," Tony said in his ear, fingers tightening around the raised edge. Steve opened his mouth to reply and Tony tightened his finger, pinching gently. What came out instead was roughly *Hnnng*, and his muscles clenched around Tony's other hand briefly.

He was struck with the urge to make this good -- not that it wouldn't have been, but especially good, not just a first time but a spectacular first time, because with this body and that kind of response, Steve must be dying for it. And he probably wouldn't stay interested in a middle-aged engineer with a prosthetic in his chest for that long.

"Please, Tony," Steve managed, kissing him again. "That's -- it's enough, please -- "

"Shh, okay, breathe," Tony said, accepting one more kiss before sitting back, gathering more lube up from the packet and slicking himself, gripping the base of his cock to keep from feeling too much, too soon. Steve curled upwards, thighs resting on top of Tony's, knees bending to pull him closer. Tony leaned forward, bracing himself with one hand, and guided himself in with the other, a slow press and a long, tight slide.

At the same time, he lowered his mouth to Steve's chest, teeth grazing the already-sensitized nipple, and Steve tensed up like he'd been shocked. His back arched and he bucked, hard, almost unseating Tony before he could push in again.

"Jesus," Steve said, back still arched, one hand clutching Tony's shoulder, the other clamped hard on the back of his neck. "Jesus, that's -- Tony -- "

"It's okay," Tony managed, forehead pressed to Steve's sternum, over his heart -- he could feel the quick beat of it, unless that was his own. "I gotcha. Come down a little, Steve."

"Come down, I -- " Steve groaned as Tony moved slightly, but he let go of his death grip (fun bruises to play with later!) and let his body drop a little, more of his weight in Tony's control now.

"That's it," Tony breathed, hips making short, slow thrusts. Steve calmed by degrees, hands sliding down Tony's back, body going lax. His head tipped back and he groaned, long and

deep. "Much better," Tony praised, and Steve's hands dug in a little, pressing into the dips in his spine. "You're absolutely stunning like this," he murmured, soothing. "Just relax, let me make you feel good."

"Already does," Steve answered breathlessly. His cock was hot against Tony's stomach, skin warm all over in fact, soft from the aloe and -- very sensitive, Tony thought, feeling muscles twitch where his beard rubbed. He tilted his head and ran it over Steve's chest, then followed it with his mouth when Steve tensed up again.

It was easy, almost effortless, the rocking of their bodies together, the way Steve responded to sensation. There was no urgency, none of the usual push towards climax -- just skin and sweat and pleasure, Steve tight around him, alternating between tense and soft below him, and the gold last light of day through the canvas.

Still, he was only human, and there was really only one direction this was headed; he could feel orgasm building, body coiling for it, and he bit down on his own lip to stave it off. Steve couldn't be that far either, almost silent at this point except for soft little cries every time Tony moved.

He adjusted his body as best he could, brought his mouth down and licked a broad line up Steve's chest, mouth closing over his nipple and sucking, waiting until Steve's breath caught before biting down sharply and snapping his body forward, slamming into Steve.

Steve gave a startled yell, twisting into the bite, and came, hips rising off the bed, hands pinning Tony in place momentarily. Tony gasped and let go, jerking clumsily as orgasm rushed over him, face pressed to the nearest aloe-scented skin.

He drew a few heaving breaths and collapsed, slipping free, almost tumbling off the bed as he rolled to one side. Steve's arm caught him and pulled him in close, and Tony turned into his side, holding onto his waist until he could catch his breath.

After a few seconds he lifted his face; Steve looked blissed out, and he couldn't resist crawling his hand up his chest. He was just so sensitive --

"Oh, careful -- " Steve managed, a little too late; Tony tweaked one nipple gently, and then watched in shock as Steve came again, head thrown back, throat bobbing, come spilling onto his belly a second time.

Steve subsided slowly, while Tony propped himself partly on his chest, studying him.

"Did you know that could happen?" he asked, when Steve opened his eyes, looking dazed.

"I," Steve managed, and then licked his lips, rolling his shoulders to settle deeper into the bed. "Not...specifically."

"Not specifically?" Tony asked. "What does that even mean?"

"Not..." Steve raised a hand, patting Tony's where it rested just below his chest. "From that. It's the serum. I knew I could...I mean, sometimes if I'm...worked up. But not because, you

know, you have an obsession with my chest."

"Science," Tony murmured delightedly. Steve gave him a mildly annoyed look. "How many times?"

"Usually I stop trying after two," Steve admitted. "Seems greedy, otherwise."

"So potentially three? Four?"

"Not right now," Steve mumbled. "Enjoy this before you start testing on me, hm?"

"Sex can be very inspiring."

"Next time," Steve said firmly. The fact that there would be a next time was not surprising exactly, but it was heartening. "S'bed's too small," he added, adjusting them so Tony's ass wasn't completely hanging off the edge.

"Now who's not enjoying the afterglow?" Tony asked. Steve hummed, not moving. Tony pushed himself up and leaned over, nose-to-nose. Steve opened his eyes and they crossed a little, trying to focus. Tony grinned.

"Skinny dip?" he suggested. "Water's warm. Stars are coming out."

"Are not. Sun's not quite down yet," Steve replied, but Tony levered himself up on only slightly unsteady legs and reached a hand down.

"Then you can admire my tan. Come on."

***

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The water actually felt great.

Steve let his eyes fall closed, letting the warm, still water of the pool swirl around him. He hung there, suspended, letting his body come to terms with a very pleasant soreness. He exhaled, flexing his shoulders, his back, his legs, and felt the muscles pull tight. Everything ached, in the best possible way.

Steve supposed really, really good sex would do that for a man.

Not that he had a lot to compare it to, but he was pretty sure that counted as really, really good sex. He shivered, a full body shudder, at the thought. He really liked sex, at least, sex with Tony.

Which was going to be a problem. No, not a problem. He'd had a problem before this, his head had already been going places it shouldn't have gone, and that was before he knew what Tony was actually like in bed. He'd made some pretty good guesses, but they paled next to the reality. So this wasn't going to be a problem, it was going to be a disaster.

Tony flirted as a matter of course, the way other people breathed, and Steve had always been able to just shrug it off as Tony being Tony. That he didn't mean it, that he didn't really have any interest in following up on the glib passes he made two or three or twenty times a day.

Now that Steve allowed himself to think about it, Tony had been making passes for a while. Which kind of made Steve an idiot for not taking him up on it sooner. He had always been slow to pick up on cues, but eventually he got there.

Now he just had to figure out how to keep the offer open.

He wasn't that naive, of course, he wasn't expecting that they'd go back to New York as a couple or anything. This did seem to be what Tony did, he had little weekend flings with people he liked, people whose company he enjoyed, people he found desirable. So Steve had that going for him at least. And if he played his cards right, maybe he could make a regular thing out of this. It was a quick flight, really. An easy trip from New York. Maybe Tony would consider the fuss worth it.

It was probably bad that he was lying here, plotting out how to finagle a spot in Tony's calendar as his regular fling.

Steve let out a sigh, letting the air out in a thin stream. At this point, he should probably be figuring out how to get Tony into bed tonight. Maybe he was just a weekend fling, the flavor of the moment, but he had another night and day, and dammit, he fully intended to take advantage of them. Even if things changed tomorrow, even if they got off the jet back in

New York and Tony never made another pass, he absolutely was determined not to sleep alone tonight.

Otherwise, that stupid giant bed was going to haunt his dreams for a very, very long time.

A splash brought his eyes open, and then Tony was slicing through the water, heading straight for him. Steve smiled, pushing himself up, and Tony grabbed his wrist. Then he was pushing off against the bottom of the pool, heading for the surface and pulling Steve along with him. Steve, caught off guard, took a second before he figured out that he should be helping.

They surfaced, almost together, and Tony tugged Steve towards the shallow end of the pool. He still had a death grip on Steve's arm, and a slightly wild look in his eyes. Steve shoved a hand through his hair, pushing it away from his face. "What's wrong?" he asked, concerned. "Are you all right?"

Tony was breathing hard, his lips parted with the force of it. "I was about to ask you that," he said. He blinked, his wet eyelashes spiky against his cheeks. "Do you have any idea how long you were down there?"

Steve stopped. "No," he admitted. Tony's face was indignant, and Steve felt an inappropriate grin twitch at the corners of his mouth. "Did you think-"

"You were lying at the bottom of a pool for like, five minutes," Tony said, and his grip on Steve's wrist was still a bit too tight, his fingers biting into Steve's skin, not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to make it clear that he wasn't going to let go. "It was like something out of The Great Gatsby, and you scared the ever loving fuck out of me."

Steve's eyebrows arched. "Sorry, it was nice down there, I didn't think of what it must've looked like from the surface, or I wouldn't-"

"How long can you hold your breath?" Tony asked, the question almost accusing.

"Pretty long," Steve admitted, and he should stop smiling, he should.

"Stop grinning. You scared about twelve years off my life, and I'm too old already, I haven't got any to spare," Tony said, but it was more petulant than angry, and he was gorgeous in the warm light of the sunset.

"I'm sorry," Steve repeated. He leaned in, his lips just brushing against Tony's. Tony grumbled something under his breath, but his fingers relaxed on Steve's wrist. He didn't let go, but the tension went out of his grip. Steve leaned his forehead against Tony's. "It just felt nice. And I don't float particularly well."

"Yeah, well, possessing zero percent or less body fat will do that to you," Tony said, his body swaying into Steve's, the water curling between them, and around them. His legs brushed up against Steve's, his foot rubbing against Steve's ankle, and that should not have been a turn-on, even Steve knew that. He apparently had issues.

Tony flicked Steve's nose with one finger, and Steve laughed. "Seriously," Tony said. "How long can you hold your breath?"

Steve's free hand slipped down the plane of Tony's back. "Couple of minutes," he whispered, enjoying the contact. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you were lying with your eyes closed, at the bottom of the pool," Tony said, his voice flat. "I found it rather worrying."

"Is that the only reason?" Steve asked, his mouth light on Tony's. His heart was pounding against his breastbone, his pulse thudding in his ears, but he was stubborn by nature, a stubbornness more fierce than fear. He'd always been afraid, and it had never stopped him from doing what he needed to do, what he felt needed doing.

He let his mouth brush against Tony's cheek, his jaw, close enough that the damp hair of Tony's goatee prickled his skin. And when Tony's head fell back with a soft, hot moan, Steve pressed a kiss to his throat, let his tongue linger against his shoulder, against the hard line of his collarbone.

Then, sucking in a deep breath, he ducked beneath the surface of the water, his hands sliding across Tony's wet skin as he worked his way down, his mouth lingering on Tony's skin as he learned his way around. Found the spots where a careful application of suction or teeth could make Tony's body twitch and twist in his arms, found what made Tony's fingers sink into his hair or grab for his shoulders.

He was on his knees, his lips pressed against Tony's hipbone, when Tony's body moved in his grip. For an instant, he wanted to resist, he wanted to keep right on going, but Tony was under the water now, his mouth finding Steve's before he drew them both up.

"No?" Steve asked, when they were both above the surface again.

"It's not that I don't appreciate the thought," Tony said, sounding far too amused for Steve's peace of mind, "because I do, it's a lovely thought, Steve. Trust me. Absolutely fantastic, but a bit advanced."

Steve pulled back, stung despite himself. "Sorry-" he started, and Tony's mouth was on his before he could finish the word. For a second, he was tense and still, but the kiss was coaxing, sweet, almost reassuring. He relaxed into it, into the strong grip of Tony's hands, and the solid pressure of his body.

When they finally pulled apart, Tony was breathing hard, his eyes bright. "New thing," he said, with a voice gone rough and thick. "And if I do something you're not expecting, or react in a way you aren't prepared for, I don't want you to end up lying on the deck, coughing up water."

"Not sexy?" Steve asked, leaning his forehead against Tony's.

"Not my thing," Tony agreed. He grinned, and the last of the tension melted out of Steve's gut. He leaned in for another kiss, and Tony obliged, his mouth hot and wet and already way

too familiar for Steve's peace of mind.

"Also," Tony said, the words hot against Steve's mouth, "chlorine is not a good taste."

Steve choked on a laugh. "And you know this from personal experience?"

"I've lived a long and wicked life," Tony said cheerfully. "Chlorine in the mouth, bad. Chlorine up the nose, that's… That's worse." Steve buried his face in the crook of Tony's neck, muffling his laughter against Tony's skin. Tony's hand slid over his head, into his hair. "Nothing kills the mood quite like a coughing, sneezing fit," he mused, and Steve lost it.

"You're an idiot," he managed, and Tony was laughing back at him.

"Don't snort the pool water," was the only reply he got.

*

They eventually made it out of the pool and into the villa, up to the room Steve had been staying in, Tony's usual room, and there was something vaguely kinky about that which Tony couldn't quite put his finger on. He collapsed damply onto the bedspread, then cracked an eye when Steve didn't join him.

"The chlorine's itching at me," Steve said, rubbing his neck, an oddly shy gesture given he was standing at the foot of the bed naked. "I'm going to wash."

"Mmm, kay," Tony mumbled, feeling himself sink deeper into the mattress.

"Don't get into trouble without me," Steve added, sounding amused. Tony was ready to doze off, half-wrapped in the big white blanket, but he heard the shower go on and then heard Steve humming tunelessly, and after a few minutes his skin started to have that chlorine-prickle feeling too. He considered ignoring it -- he'd ignored worse -- but after all, Steve was in the shower...

Steve startled when Tony rapped on the glass and then slid it open without waiting for a reply. He jerked to one side slightly, hand coming down to protect his dignity.

"Don't throw the soap, just me," Tony said, grinning.

"Warn a fella, jeez," Steve said, but he didn't object when Tony took the soap out of his hand and lathered his own palms with it. He rubbed his own neck and shoulders, ducking under the spray Steve had vacated, then tipped forward so his head was wet, reaching back to pull Steve into the spray with him, tugging Steve's arm around his waist. Steve curved around him obediently, breath warm on the back of Tony's neck, and then kissed the skin there, hesitant, like he thought it might not be allowed. Tony could feel Steve's stomach tense, feel him start to pull away as arousal made his erection more obvious, and he stepped away from Steve's arm and turned, walking him back a little, kissing him and sliding his hands between them.

"Oh," Steve murmured, as Tony caught some stray suds on his hip and started to stroke him gently, wondering if it was his presence or Steve's youth or the Serum that was responsible,

pleased with whichever it was. Steve's hands ran up and down his ribcage, clutching occasionally, smoothing up over his chest. "Oh -- Tony -- "

"Feel good?" Tony asked, and Steve nodded against his shoulder. "Good. Nice..."

He felt Steve's weight shift and then his arm move, hand brushing up Tony's thigh, and --

Steve tensed and pulled back, confusion crossing his face. Tony raised his eyebrows.

"You're not..." he said, frowning. "Are you not -- into this?"

"What?" Tony asked incredulously. "Do I seem like I'm not into this?"

"But -- you're, and...before..." Steve looked down at him, eyes on his face, and his hands had pulled back but Tony could feel the ghost of their touch.

"You're not hard," Steve added in a low voice, and Tony heard the hint of embarrassment and concern there.

"I'm also not twenty-five," Tony said, smiling reassuringly. "And I have a heart condition. It takes me a little longer."

Steve still seemed confused, so Tony took one of his hands and brought it up to his chest, resting it there before sliding it over one peaked nipple.

"I have taken a crapload of beating in my life, and not all of us have super-healing," he said, trying not to smile now, because -- well, serious discussion time. Still, it was a little funny. "I don't do what I don't want to do, Steve. Hit me up tomorrow morning and I promise you I will be more than good to go, but tonight -- that was probably it for me. That does not mean I am not enjoying this, every damn second of it. I want to memorize the way you look when you come," he added, and Steve looked away, flushed.

"I don't..." he started, then stopped and looked back. "That feels greedy. To me. That I can't -- that I would just take from you."

"But I'm offering," Tony said. "I'm going to enjoy it too. Not quite in the same way, but that doesn't mean less. I want to touch you."

"Are you sure?"

"I am one hundred percent sure," Tony said fervently. "Hundred and ten, even."

Steve seemed to consider it, steam rising around them, breath echoing around the tiles. Tony touched a hand to his stomach, testing. Steve nodded, and Tony raised his other hand to Steve's chin, tipping it a little so that they were nose-to-nose, eyes open.

"Watch me," he said quietly. "And you tell me I didn't like this."

He touched him again, a little rougher now, thumb sliding over Steve's head on every stroke. Steve grunted, hips jerking, and started to close his eyes; Tony tapped his fingers on his

cheekbone and his eyes jerked open again, a smile starting to curve up his lips. He looked now like he did when someone, stupidly, challenged him to do something they didn't think he could do. Every time his eyes started to slide shut, mouth open on soft, low groans, Tony tapped him, until finally he lurched forward into Tony, caught him around the shoulders, and came against his belly.

The room filled with harsh breaths and the patter of water on the tiles.

"That was amazing," Tony said in his ear. "You were beautiful."

Sweet God, what he wouldn't do to keep this for even a little while. It'd frustrate the hell out of Steve, sooner or later, but in the meantime he was going to build up a lot of memories -- Steve's chest against his, the look on his face, the way he would let Tony play his body like a fine-tuned instrument.

Steve nodded, kissed him again, and let himself be led out of the shower, dried off and maneuvered gently towards the bed. He tugged on a pair of stray sleep pants and sat on the edge, pulling Tony into the space between his legs, resting his forehead on his chest.

"Long day," Tony said, hands curling in his damp hair. "Go to sleep."

"Are you staying here?"

"Do you want me to?"

Steve nodded against his chest. "If that's okay."

"Easy access for the morning," Tony said lightly, and heard a muffled noise, possibly a laugh. "Lie down," he said, and Steve eased onto the bed, sleepily nosing into the pillow. Tony circled -- the other side of the bed was his side usually anyway, regardless of where he was -- and crawled under the light blanket naked, flopping over on his stomach. He felt Steve inch over, sliding a leg across his and leaning a little on Tony's shoulder, but he was asleep before he could make a smartass remark about cuddling, which was probably just as well.

He slept deep and hard, as if his body was especially enjoying the luxury of post-coital chemicals, and he woke to find himself on his back, Steve's face pressed into his shoulder, body half-on-top of him, morning wood nudging his thigh. He grinned, wriggled a little to help Steve's sleep pants ride down his waist, and caught Steve's lip between his teeth when his eyes opened.

"Told you I just needed a nap," he said, and Steve blinked in surprise as Tony pushed him over, straddling him. He accepted the first kiss and actively engaged in the second one, and then Tony's world went upside-down for a minute as Steve flipped them again, shoving the tangled blanket aside and bending to huff warm air against his belly.

"Lemme," he said, one hand rising to cup Tony's half-hard cock possessively.

"Be my guest," Tony said, cradling Steve's head in his hands, legs falling open. Steve's breath was warm on his skin. He thought he found a hint of guilt in Steve's eyes as they skimmed up

his body, but Tony ignored it, enjoying the warmth of his mouth instead.

There were certainly worse ways to wake up, after all. Sleepy morning blowjobs really ranked somewhere near the top, especially when offered with such enthusiasm.

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Steve woke up alone. He wasn't really surprised.

For a moment, he kept his eyes closed, clinging to the soft embrace of sleep, but next to him, the sheets were empty and cool, and his phone was buzzing on the table next to the bed. He rolled over, eyes catching on the subtle, probably very expensive clock. It confirmed what he'd suspected from the light pouring in the wide windows: he'd slept way too late.

He flopped back on the pillows with a sigh. He supposed it was unavoidable. They'd woken up, and fallen back asleep half a dozen times. Every time he'd blinked awake, it was with Tony warm and solid beside him, Tony's hot hands and mouth and voice and body twisting him into knots and then unravelling him again. Tony seemed to delight in seeing just what kind of a reaction he could get out of Steve with just a few touches.

Steve had always known better than to underestimate Tony's brilliant mind, but he'd never really understood just how dangerous the man could be when he wanted to be. Having Tony's full attention, even for a few hours, had been intoxicating. It was hard to remember the time when he'd been able to get drunk. Prior to the serum, he hadn't done it much; his delicate constitution wasn't up to the challenge of recovering from a serious bender. But he'd been drunk a few times, and he remembered the slow, pleasant descent into the warmth and pleasure that the alcohol had offered. He remembered the way his brain had slipped away from him, thoughts going simple and sluggish as his body had sunk into a haze that wasn't so much pleasure as it was a stunning lack of pain.

Sex with Tony was just as intoxicating, as it turned out.

Of course, if sleeping with Tony was like being pleasantly drunk, maybe waking up alone was the hangover he had to endure. It was worth it, and Steve hadn't expected him to stick around as long as he had. He closed his eyes, and remembered the warmth of someone sleeping next to him, the way that the sensation of not being alone had started to feel familiar.

He hadn't had that for long, but he liked it. A lot.

"You going to answer that?"

His head snapped around, in time to see Tony pad across the bedroom from the bathroom, naked and unselfconscious about it. His eyes were half closed, his hair a tangle of damp black curls, and he headed straight back to the bed, collapsing onto the mattress next to Steve with a groan of pleasure. He buried his face in the pillows, the skin of his back and shoulders gilded a tawny gold in the morning sunlight.

Steve had been thinking about this for the entire weekend, he'd nearly dreamed of this, but the reality of it was so much better than anything he'd managed to come up with. He was

sleekly muscled, not bulky or heavy, but with the sharp definition of a man who worked with his hands for a living. It was easy to forget, when fighting beside the blunt force that was the Iron Man armor, that the man inside it had crafted the suit by hand. Steve had to struggle against the impulse to reach out and touch, to caress, to TAKE. Especially when Tony's head turned, just a little, laughing brown eyes tipping in Steve's direction.

God, he was beautiful.

Tony arched an eyebrow. "So?"

"So?" Steve replied, because his addled brain couldn't come up with anything better, anything suaver.

Tony grinned, the expression half buried in the pillow. "You going to get that?" he asked.

It took Steve a few seconds to figure out what he was talking about. "Oh. Oh! The phone." He rolled over, reaching for it. "You take a shower?"

"Considered it, then got lazy and just splashed my face and hair," Tony said. He moved, just a little, snuggling down into the bed, and Steve had a hard time not staring at how his ass flexed with the movement. "Didn't expect you to sleep in."

"Me, neither," Steve said. His fingers tightened on his phone as he resisted the urge to curl up next to Tony and play with the damp strands of his hair. Instead, he sat up, bracing his back against the pillows, and ran his free hand through his own hair instead. "Guess you wore me out."

Tony chuckled, low and wicked, and Steve shifted, his body responding to the sound. Maybe this was what addiction was like. He could see how it snuck up on people, and how it ruined them.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Tony said, yawning. "What time is it?"

"Nearly eleven," Steve said. Tony groaned again, and Steve felt his mouth curl in a smile that felt entirely too sweet and entirely too affectionate. "You hungry?" he asked. "I could make some eggs, or-"

"Feed me and I'm yours forever," Tony said, and Steve's stomach flipped over. He kind of wished it would be that easy.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said. He swung his legs off the side of the bed, leaning over to grab the pajama pants that had ended up on the floor in the middle of the night. "Coffee?" he asked, as he stepped into them. Tony let out an obscene moan, and Steve grinned. "Okay, right. Stupid question." He rolled to his feet, snugging the pajama pants up around his waist. They had the StarkIndustries logo on them, like everything else here. Tony apparently liked to claim his guests.

"Yeah, you're usually smarter than this," Tony said. "I mean, some people say that sex kills brain cells, but I think that I'm living proof that it certainly does not."

“Maybe it’s just sex with you that kills brain cells,” Steve said as he walked around the bed, and Tony laughed. Steve grinned, and before he could think twice about it, before he could second guess himself, he leaned over, brushing a kiss against the warmth of Tony’s shoulder. Tony just chuckled, one hand fumbling behind him, grabbing at Steve’s hip.

“I am that fucking good, and I love your refractory period, or lack of one,” Tony said, unrepentant.

Steve felt his face heat. “Glad it’s working out for you,” he said, and he was not going to think of how many times he’d come in the last twenty four hours. He was pretty sure the number was obscene. “I’ll call you when the eggs are done.”

“Just turn on the coffee. I’ll head its siren call.” Tony rolled over, tangling himself in the sheets. One hand emerged, holding Steve’s phone between his first two fingers. “And check your phone.”

Steve took it from him, shaking his head. “Thanks,” he said, lingering just long enough to open up his texts. “It’s from Clint, he’s-”

Steve blinked down at the message. “Congrats on being Tony’s newest conquest!” it said, with a long string of bouncing, laughing smiley faces after it.

Steve considered that. Opened his mouth. Closed it. “Have you talked to Clint today?” he asked at last.

Tony let out a snort, half muffled in his pillow. “Steve, I try not to talk to Clint when I’m in the same building with him,” he mumbled. “Out here? If there was going to be contact, it would be a snapchat of the beach at sunset entitled ‘Glad you’re not here.’” He rolled over, onto his back. “Why?”

“No reason,” Steve said, his palm closing around the phone. He gave Tony a tight smile. “Okay. Breakfast.” He was out of the room before Tony could say another word, and down the stairs before he pulled up the message again. In the kitchen, he stared at it, trying to figure it out. Giving up, he placed a call.

“Cap! How’s life on Pleasure Island?” Clint asked without any other introduction.

“Great, actually,” Steve said, leaning up against the cabinets. “Nice sunsets, good swimming weather, I got too much sun all around. Wanna explain this message?”

Clint was already giggling under his breath, snickering in the way that made it clear that he tickled himself, even when no one else was amused. “Yeah, well, the blowback from Stark’s sex tape hit on Saturday morning-”

“Wait, his WHAT?” Steve said, jerking to a stop.

“Sex tape,” Clint repeated. He stopped. “Wait, did we not tell you about the sex tape?”

“No,” Steve said, keeping his voice carefully modulated. “You did not.”

“That was a good plan on our part,” Clint said. “Short version, the magazine pictures were kind of disappointing, and this scumbag website piggybacked on people’s need to see Tony’s wang and said they had a sex tape, which they released to much fanfare.”

“Oh, my God,” Steve said. He sucked in a sharp breath. “Clint-”

“Yeah, good call on not telling you. Anyway, SHIELD got hold of it, and it’s not him, by the way, in case you were concerned-”

“You WATCHED it?” Steve asked, cradling his face in one broad palm. “Clint, that’s-”

“Not him,” Clint said. “It’s filmed from behind the guy, really, you can’t see much of anything, but it’s pretty dark and if it was him? We’d have an arc reactor glow, and we don’t. General public doesn’t know that, of course, but StarkIndustries has issued an official statement distancing Tony from the whole mess with a nice bit of condemnation thrown in.”

Steve shook his head. “I can’t believe you watched it.”

“I can’t believe you can’t believe it,” Clint said. “I’m disappointed in you, Cap. Anyway, looking to recoup something resembling credibility, the site that broke the news about the tape originally has noticed Tony’s conspicuous absence from New York this weekend. He hasn’t been seen at any of his usual haunts, or at any of the weekend’s parties. So this morning, after a day or so of making not so veiled hints about him having a new fling, this morning they came right out and said that he’s got a new sweet bit on the side, and he’s holed up somewhere with her.” Clint paused. “Or him, as the case would be, since, well, it’s you.”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, even as he headed for the fridge. “But no one-”

“No, nobody knows you’re the one hanging with him this weekend, other than us. We promise not to let anyone know that you’ve succumbed to his wiles,” Clint said, his voice cheerful.

“I appreciate that.” Steve grabbed a carton of eggs, and the pound of bacon behind it. He needed protein this morning.

“I’m holding out for a large payout,” Clint said, followed by a yelp of pain. “Jesus, Nat, you are- Don’t! OW!”

Steve listened, amused, at the sound of scuffling. “If you break him, we’re going to have to find another archer, and they’re pretty rare,” he said, not at all doubting who now held the phone.

“I have the local Ren Faire on speed dial,” Nat said, and Steve could hear Clint sputtering in the background. “Shut up, Barton, we can replace you with the guy who spends the weekend in the stocks at this rate.”

“Sex tape?” he asked.

“It barely counted as a sex tape,” Natasha said. “SHIELD is pretty sure it was a deliberate set up, guy makes a quickie tape with a willing girl, they split the money when it gets sold to the

tabloids. We're looking into it." She paused. "However, as the rumors are now getting a bit…" She paused. "Concentrated, it might be best for him to head back here, and put in an appearance."

Steve made a face. "Yeah," he agreed, because agreement was necessary right now. "He's still in bed, but I think a fresh pot of coffee should lure him out, then I'll see about getting him to file a flight plan."

"Sorry to cut your tropical vacation short, but that's probably for the best," Natasha agreed.

In the background, Clint yelled, "Enjoy the Mile High Club introductory membership!"

"You're an idiot," Natasha told him, and Clint laughed. "We'll talk to you when you get home, Cap."

"Thanks," he said, and opened a cabinet for the frying pan.

And wondered if he could someone manage that Mile High Club thing.

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Tony dozed for another few minutes, but he couldn't fall back asleep; for one thing, the smell of coffee and the trailing smell of bacon flipped certain switches in his brain. Eventually he groaned, resigning himself to the entire walk downstairs as suffering that would be rewarded with caffeine, and fumbled around for clothing. He was pretty sure he got a pair of pants that, if not his, had been tailored for him at some point and then left here; he was nearly sure the shirt was his until he got downstairs and was halfway through a cup of coffee.

His brain was alert enough by then to notice Steve was casting him glances over the massive pair of frying pans on the stove.

"What, do I have a hickey?" he asked.

"N -- well, maybe, but not visible," Steve said. "You've got my shirt on."

"Oh?" Tony looked down. The shirt fit him perfectly. "You need to learn how to take your own measurements."

"My shirts fit fine."

Tony held up one hand, a gesture of innocence, and took another sip of coffee. "They really don't, but God forbid I take away a source of daily joy for so many. Think you're making enough eggs, there?" he added.

Steve looked down at the pan, which wasn't so much fried eggs at this point as it was one large mass of egg, frying. He nudged one egg away from its companions and flipped it.

"I got hungry," he said sheepishly. Tony shot him a wicked grin, delighted when he blushed. "Besides, after breakfast -- "

"Brunch! Hey, mimosas -- "

"Breakfast," Steve said firmly, blocking Tony's access to the fridge with an outflung leg, " -- we need to pack up and scram. No mimosas, you're flying."

"What's the rush? Tired of tropical sunsets?" Tony asked lightly, to cover his concern. This was awfully fast, more like a bolt from the island than a reluctant return to civilization. He gave Steve a gentle push; the asshole stayed upright, firmly balanced on one foot, and flipped some bacon.

"Clint says -- "

Tony groaned. "Oh, spare me -- "

"*Clint says* people have noticed you're not in town. They think you're secluded away somewhere with your newest conquest," Steve added, face red.

The phrase *not untrue* rose in Tony's throat, but he bit down on the urge to say it. Unfair to Steve, and not his intention in taking this trip.

"Can't win for losing with those vultures, can I?" he asked instead. Steve nodded, scooping a pair of eggs out onto a plate, topping them with slices of toast from the oven and handing them over like a peace offering.

"Bacon'll be a minute or two."

"That's fine, bacon shouldn't be adulterated by other breakfastfoods," Tony said, seating himself at the kitchen bar to eat. Silence descended, except for Steve's tuneless humming.

Well. This was awkward.

"Anyway, Natasha thinks, and I agree, that we should get back," Steve said, after a few minutes. "You're going to have some damage control to do, no matter what, but time's only going to make the situation worse."

Tony poked at one of the eggs. The yolk was perfectly runny, of course. "Yeah."

"At least you had a nice time first, right?"

It had been a nice time, that much was true. Possibly Steve had just been thinking of that when he'd asked for a second kiss -- well, they'd both had a nice time regardless, but maybe that was all Steve intended. Some fun, somewhere that wasn't really *real* -- a harmless sort of fantasy. And certainly he didn't want to subject Steve to the kind of scrutiny his bed partners normally received in situations like this, despite his best efforts. He knew he was a difficult person to begin with, and thrusting someone into that situation with him just compounded the problem.

So. That was probably that.

"I did have a nice time. Thank you for letting me kidnap you," he added, and Steve blushed again, dumping the rest of the eggs onto another plate, eating a few hasty bites while the bacon finished cooking. Tony got up to refill his coffee, waggling the pot at Steve, who nodded and held out his mug.

"I promise to stop trying to cook when we get back to Manhattan," Tony said, brain going overtime to fill the silence as he filled the cup.

"Don't see why, you won't get better unless you keep at it. We should make you cook twice a week. Good for the soul," Steve said, a teasing grin lighting his face.

"Why do you hate me, and everyone I'd have to feed?"

Steve laughed. "You're famous, can't you get some big name chef to teach you?"

"I admit no weakness to outsiders."

"Being you must be so exhausting," Steve remarked, still amused, and Tony smiled over his plate as Steve got up to dish out the bacon. Amused was better than awkward. Mornings after, you could never tell -- best to run, but if you couldn't run, best to hide just a little. "We'll talk about the cookery situation when we're home," Steve continued.

Home. The island was nice, true -- warm, quiet, private -- but he couldn't really deny it wasn't home. Even Malibu had never been home the same way Manhattan was, with people waiting for them and life ready to restart the minute he arrived. He wouldn't mind that so much -- at least if he had to face the press, the Avengers would be at his back, and if things got bad, hiding in his workshop had been a perfectly valid solution for the last thirty five years of his life or so.

"You gonna eat that second egg?" Steve asked, mouth full of the last of his *four eggs*. Tony shook his head, grinning, and scooped it onto Steve's outstretched plate.

***

He realized that he was just making up excuses not to leave now.

He realized it, but he didn't really care. Steve gave a pillow a quick fluff before he tossed it against the headboard and snagged the comforter from the floor. He shook it out, the fabric cracking through the air as he did his best to get rid of the worst of the wrinkles.

Sunlight filled the room, warm and dreamy, and he paused for a second, his arms full of linens, to consider the windows. The sheer curtains moved with the breeze, and he took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the salt air one last time.

Idly, he wondered if he could get away with disabling the jet somehow. Not permanently or anything. Just something small. Something that Tony might not notice for a day or so, or a few days, if he didn't want to notice. Steve wouldn't be able to get away with smashing anything, or taking a part out, but he'd done enough sabotage in his day to know just how to

loosen the right wire, just how to kink something to make it look like a plausible malfunction. All he had to do was keep them from being able to take off. For a few hours.

Or a few days. That would be harder. He sat down on the edge of the bed, considering the view through the window, the swaying trees and the glittering sea beyond them. It could be done, but it would be a lot harder. He'd have to keep anyone from coming out to get them, if he wanted to prolong this, if he wanted to give them a little extra time, or a lot of extra time.

For one thing, he'd have to disable their phones…

Steve stopped, staring down at his hands where they had sunk into the comforter, his fingers gripping the fabric with enough force to turn his knuckles white. "Was I just," he said aloud, "trying to figure out a way to trap us here?" He nodded. "Okay. Time to go home."

He stood up, flicking the comforter out with a snap of his hands. "I get laid once or twice and apparently I lose my mind," he muttered.

"Steve?"

He started, his leg hitting the side of the bed hard. He bit back a curse as Tony stuck his head through the open door. Tony's brows drew up tight. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Steve said, trying for a smile. "Just, didn't realize you were out there."

"Thought I heard you talking, didn't want to just walk in if you were on the phone." Tony leaned against the doorframe. "You ready to go?" he asked, his arms folded over his chest. "I had Javis file the flight plan so we should be good to go any time."

"Yeah. I just-" Steve nodded at the bed. "Just tidying up." He glanced up, drinking in the sight of Tony in the fall of sunlight. He was besotted, and there was no denying it. "Give me a second, Tony."

He smiled, one eyebrow arching. "Steve. A crew will come in and clean everything up."

"I know, but it's not fair to leave a mess," Steve said. He straightened the blankets with a twitch of his hand, the movements automatic and easy.

"Army corners?" Tony asked, watching him.

"When I'm done, you'll be able to bounce a silver half dollar off of it," Steve said. "You could help, Stark."

"I could, but-"

"I know, you've hired someone to do it, which doesn't mean you should make their life harder," Steve said, walking around the bed, tucking in the sheets and blankets as he went. "Did you make your bed?"

"No," Tony said, his voice oddly muffled.

Steve glanced up at him. Tony was avoiding his eyes, one hand clamped over his mouth. "What?" Steve asked, feeling the smile break over his face.

"I think," Tony said, "it's kind of unfair to expect the next visitor to sleep in that bed. After all-" He let out a cough that sounded far too much like a laugh. "We, uh, we kind of made a mess of it, Steve."

It took Steve a second to realize what he was saying. He stared down at the neatly made bed. "Oh," he said, and he felt his face heat.

"Yeah, that was-" Tony was laughing out loud now, his back braced against the door frame, his arms folded tight over his stomach. The force of his laughter bent him double, and "That was a lot of fucking we did, Steve, maybe we should wash the sheets, huh?"

Steve's eyes closed. "Right. I'm an idiot."

"Not an idiot." Tony was still laughing, but that was fine. The strained, tight look was gone from his face, from his eyes, and he was back to being Tony, brilliant and mercurial. Steve caught himself grinning back.

"Kind of an idiot," Steve told him, just to make Tony laugh again.

"Okay, a little bit." Tony grabbed the corner of the comforter and pulled it back. "The cleaning crew will come in and wash everything, get the house cleaned up, Steve. I promise, I pay them handsomely for it, and at least this time, they don't have to fish empty bottles out of the pool." He paused, one eyebrow arching. "Or, for that matter, any guests."

Steve gave him a look. "What kind of parties have you been throwing out here, Stark?" he asked, trying to sound stern, but his heart wasn't in it. He ducked his head to hide his smile.

"Only the classiest soirees," Tony assured him, throwing an arm around Steve's shoulders, steering him towards the door. "Pack up, don't linger, and I might just invite you to the next one."

Steve had a feeling he wouldn't like it. That he wouldn't like sharing Tony's attention, or wondering who Tony was disappearing off with. Who would occupy this bed with him next time. He glanced over his shoulder, trying to memorize everything about the room, so if he never came back, he could keep it just like this in his head.

The blankets and sheets in an untidy heap, the sunlight streaming across white linens, the smell of sea air and Tony's skin, all of it seemed to be slipping away from him, and he tramped down on an unreasonable sense of panic.

He wasn't losing anything. He couldn't lose something he'd never had. It had been a lovely few days, and an even better few hours, but it was done now. He turned back around, and shut the door behind them with a click.

Tony was saying something, as he headed down the stairs, his footsteps light and assured. He seemed to realize, halfway down, that he was alone, and he turned back, his hand on the

bannister, his face tipped up towards Steve. "Steve?" he asked, curiosity slipping across his face. "You okay?"

Steve stood there, aching for something he'd never had, and forced his fingers to drop away from the doorknob. "Yeah," he said. But he didn't move. "This was nice," he blurted out, and Tony's eyebrows arched. Steve cleared his throat, trying not to think about the way his face was heating up. "Better than nice. It was great."

Tony's grin was filthy, and Steve felt the punch of lust, hot and hard, low in his stomach. "So glad you had a good time," Tony said, eyes dancing. "Make sure you fill out a comment card on the way out of the establishment."

Steve smiled back. "This was great," he said again, and the word was inadequate. For any of it. But he didn't have a better one, he'd never been glib, or had the way with words that Tony did, he didn't have the ability to deflect or to turn things back on the speaker. He stared down at Tony, trying to find a way to verbalize it. "But the rest of it, the non-sex stuff, I mean, that was-" He was struggling now, struggling to make it make sense to himself. He could live without the sex. If this was it, this was it. If their pleasant tropical fantasy was over, if Tony never looked at him that way again, he could handle that.

He couldn't handle losing the rest of it.

He met Tony's eyes directly. "I liked the sex," he said, because there didn't seem a better way to put it. "A lot. But I loved the rest of it." He smiled. "Dinner, and the movies, and cooking with you, and-" He shoved a hand through his hair, frustrated. "I don't know how to explain this," he said.

Tony smiled. "You had a good time as lovers," he said, his voice wry, "but a better time as friends."

That was it, or was it, there was something wrong with that but Steve was already nodded. "Just-" He gave Tony a lopsided smile. "I don't want to lose that. I…" Need it, he wanted to say. So desperately. He still felt alone sometimes, alone and isolated and he needed all of them.

But he needed Tony, in a way he didn't want to examine.

Tony held a hand out to him. "Steve, you're always, and I do mean always, going to be my friend," he said, and Steve's shoulders sagged in relief. "Now that we've cleared up that I'm not going to delete you from my phone just because you put out, can we head home?"

Steve nodded. "Thanks, Tony," he said. Maybe this was going to be okay. Maybe he could have everything.

He wanted to believe he could.

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Chapter End Notes

Chibiesque on Tumblr did this delightful illustration of Steve in the pool; see the original (and find a link to the NSFW version) **here.**

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was difficult, being dumped by Captain America.

Tony didn't begrudge him the "I want to be friends" speech, because Steve hadn't lived through the 90s when that speech became so cliche it was a joke on sitcoms. And he knew Steve genuinely did want to be friends. "Dumped" was probably not even the right word; they'd had a fling on a tropical island on a break from reality, it wasn't like they'd exchanged promise rings or something.

Didn't mean it didn't sting, just a little.

Still, Tony Stark was nothing if not professional, and it wasn't the first time a romantic -- a *sexual* relationship had infringed on a working relationship. The only real disaster had been Ty, and he'd learned a lot from that, enough to maintain an easy, casual camaraderie with someone he was desperately attracted to who apparently wasn't terribly attracted back.

Besides, the first few days after they returned were a whirlwind of Stark Industries meetings, individual meets with fussy shareholders who wanted Tony's word he wasn't screwing around on company time, and PR interviews where he stoically and with dignity talked about what a shame it was that half the magazine industry now depended on photos of people in private to sell their wares, when you could get all kinds of pornography on the internet for free. He barely saw Pepper, let alone Steve and the other Avengers.

And if Steve hadn't got the hang of not being touchy-feely in their interactions just yet, well, Tony knew how to politely withdraw. Their interactions weren't awkward, they weren't fraught with tension, they were just...civil, and Tony made sure they were platonic, in a physical sense. Steve seemed confused, but Steve was often confused about the more refined social niceties. Bless the man, he wasn't suave.

Tony had rather enjoyed his lack of suave. It was rare to find someone in his sex life who said exactly what they meant. Pepper, of course, but that had been a disaster for unrelated reasons.

There was one evening, not that long after they'd returned -- the team assembled in the lounge, Thor and Natasha watching TV, Clint and Bruce playing pool, Tony spectating and Steve oscillating back and forth between groups, seemingly looking for excuses to ramble. It was a peculiar interaction, but Tony tried not to overthink it.

He'd gone to the bar to get a drink, and Steve had said he wanted one too, following him. Tony had seen Bruce glance up at them quickly, eyes narrow, but figured he was just relieved Steve had stopped hovering so he could make his shot in peace.

"What'll you have?" Tony asked with a grin, waggling the scotch he was pouring for himself. "Beer, or are you classing it up tonight?"

"Just a ginger ale," Steve said. "I can get it."

"S'fine, I'm already back here," Tony replied, scooping ice into a glass and digging in the cooler below the bar for the sodas that they kept there pretty much specifically for Steve. He popped the tab and poured. "You seem restless."

"I guess. Lots to think about, being back."

It was the first time either of them had referenced the trip. Tony topped up the glass and set the can down, sliding both across the bar.

"Hard to get used to all the city noise again," Steve added. "I like it, but that was nice too. Peaceful."

"Yup," Tony agreed, wondering where this was going, if anywhere. He'd like to brace for impact.

"You thinking about going back there sometime, maybe?" Steve asked.

"Not for a while," Tony said bitterly. "Apparently I'm indisfuckingspensible to New York society, the way they notice when I'm gone. You can bet the news bureau has a watch for when I file flight plans, at this point."

"Oh," Steve said. "Yeah, that makes sense."

He took his drink and went back to the pool table, looking oddly crestfallen. Tony took a sip of his scotch and let it burn its way down.

The next day, he was in the middle of an argument with Pepper on the phone when Steve showed up to breakfast.

"Look, I just -- " Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, then gave Steve a wave, phone in his other hand. "I know I have to go."

"Good, because you really have to go, Tony. It's a Maria Stark Foundation event, and you know their donation levels rise when you're at the event. And it'll be good PR for you, too, to be seen -- "

"I know that," Tony repeated. "I'm very sorry, Pepper, I know I shouldn't have taken my pants off, but in hindsight disappearing wasn't our best strategic move either."

"Tony, I'm not trying to -- "

"Sorry. I'm not -- this isn't your fault. Sorry," he repeated more contritely, because none of this was Pepper's fault and even when he'd been her boss instead of the other way around, he'd tried not to blame her for things she couldn't control. "All I'm saying is that if I have to go to this thing, I don't want to spend the entire evening with someone I can't stand."

"So take Natasha."

"Yeah, that'll go well."

Pepper laughed. Steve raised an eyebrow as he poured out a bowl of cereal.

"Look, I have my assistant assembling some dossiers," Pepper said. "Women you've met, women you like, women who already have a ticket and don't have a plus-one. Pick out a handful and we'll make one of them happen."

"This feels crass and weird."

"Well, remember this feeling next time you take your underwear off in a semi-public place," Pepper said, and she had a point. "I'll bring the folder by at lunch. In the meantime, consult your little black book and pick out your own date, if you don't like any of the ones I pick."

"Okay. I'll call the Foundation and confirm I'll be there. How much are we giving?"

"Fifty thousand."

"Seems a little cheap."

"It's for show. It's a demographically selected number to encourage low-ballers to up their ante. You've already given them ten million this year."

"Oh, well, okay," Tony said, feeling like at this point he was just looking for reasons to be cranky. "Thank you, Pepper."

"See you at lunch, Tony," Pepper said. Tony set the phone down and went to refill his coffee.

"That sounded fraught," Steve commented.

"Yeah, well, PR politics," Tony said. "There's a Stark gala on Friday night and Pepper thinks I shouldn't go stag."

"Oh?"

"I need someone to go with me, someone respectable," Tony said, and Steve nodded. "But not too respectable, so I don't look like I'm trying to like, date my way back into society's good graces. Society actually doesn't care, but the media cares about society and the shareholders care about the media, soooooo."

"Awkward," Steve murmured. "Am I supposed to be at this one?"

"Not unless you got an invite, or really want to spend the evening making small talk with a bunch of self-congratulatory philanthropists. In which case, Pepper's bringing a literal binder of women over to me at lunch for me to choose from. I'm sure she could set you up with a sugar mama from among the candidates."

"I'll pass," Steve said. He rose, setting his half-finished bowl of cereal in the sink. "But I hope you have a good time."

"Odds are low, but thank you," Tony said. "You heading to the gym?"

"I think I might go running," Steve said. "Call if anything comes up."

***

Steve didn't head back to the tower until he felt like he'd run around the island of Manhattan. Twice.

It wasn't enough, because Pepper and Tony were still staring each other down over the kitchen table when he walked in. Tony's eyes darted to the door when Steve made the mistake of opening it, pinning him in place and making it clear that a dignified retreat was impossible, but Pepper never so much as turned her head to acknowledge him.

"Can't we-" Tony started.

"No," she said. Tony opened his mouth again and she leaned forward, her hands pressed to the tabletop. "No."

"Pepper-"

She pointed at the tablet in front of him. "Pick."

Tony threw his hands in the air. "It doesn't matter!" He stood up, the movement almost violent. The chair scraped across the kitchen floor, and Steve flinched. Tony's head snapped in his direction. "Let Steve pick!" he said, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

Pepper sighed. "Hello, Steve," she said, glancing at him. She managed a tired sort of smile for him, and Steve returned it. He hoped his didn't look as tired as hers did, but he suspected it wasn't any brighter. Tony got to them both. Pepper eyed him. "How are you?"

"Fine," Steve said. "Thank you." Stuck with nothing to say and nothing to do, he headed towards the fridge. "Sorry, I just- Needed a bottle of water. Didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not, we're done here," Tony said.

"Don't you dare-" Pepper started, and Tony cut her off.

"Just pick one, Pep, I don't care, I honestly do not care, I could not give a fuck for this, I don't know what you expect me to say, but I. Don't. Care!" The words rose in volume to something just under a shout, and Pepper rolled her eyes.

"So, Isabelle, then," she said, rubbing her forehead with stiff fingers.

"Fine, whatever, I do not care!" Tony said, and he stomped straight for the door. Steve, caught in his path, took a step to the side, bumping into the refrigerator. Tony's footsteps seemed to falter, just for a second, and then he was stalking past. He slammed his way out of the door and was gone.

In the strained silence that followed, Steve heard something crunch. Caught off guard, he looked down, only to find the water bottle straining in his grip. Carefully, he flexed his fingers, releasing the pressure.

“Steve?”

His head snapped up. “I’m sorry,” he said, because it felt like reflex by now. It felt like all he’d done over the last few days was apologize. He’d resent that, but Pepper didn’t deserve it. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Pepper waved that away. “You didn’t, he’s just in a foul mood.” She considered Steve, her face unreadable. "Steve, did something happen?"

Steve paused, the bottle halfway to his lips. "No," he said, and Pepper arched an eyebrow at him.

"Huh," she said, her lips curling up in a slight smile. "Because I just spent an hour trying to wrangle Tony into doing something that should've been an easy sell, and instead, it was like wrestling a bear.” Her eyes tipped towards the door. “This whole situation isn’t pleasant, but it’s also not that unusual. He gets caught with his pants down a bit more often than I’d like.”

Steve shrugged, ignoring the twinge of pain in his chest.. "You'd need to ask him about that," he said, his voice tense. "He's not really talking to me, either.”

"I noticed. Which does seem odd, the two of you usually get along like two peas in a pod." She reached for her coffee cup, cradling it between her palms. "Steve, did you have a fight? He gets like this sometimes. He’ll apologize, later, he always does. I know that doesn’t make it right, but it does make it a little easier to deal with. That he does apologize, and he does mean it."

"No, it wasn’t a fight.. I-" He stopped, and let out a sigh. "I might have overstepped our..." He swallowed. "Our relationship."

"It's hard to overstep with Tony," Pepper pointed out. She took a sip of her coffee. "Especially for you."

“Yeah, well, I seem to have managed it,” Steve said, with a wry smile. He rolled his water bottle between his hands. “I’m good at managing that.”

Pepper considered him for a long moment, then pushed the chair next to her away from the table. She patted the seat. “Have a seat, Steve.”

He gave it a longing look. “I shouldn’t,” he said.

“Yes. You absolutely should,” she said. He paused, considering, and Pepper arched one eyebrow. “Steve? Sit. Down.”

Steve sat down.

“He can be taught,” Pepper said, propping her chin on her fist. “So. What happened?”

“What makes you think-”

Her lips twitched up. “Steve, do you know who I just agreed to set Tony up with?”

Steve’s jaw went tight. “No. I don’t-”

“Isabelle.” Pepper’s eyebrows arched. “One name. Just Isabelle. Supermodel. She’s one of the highest paid models in the world, and she comes from wealth, her family owns massive cattle ranches in Brazil. Perpetually on People magazine’s Most Beautiful People list. She’s lovely, intelligent, multilingual, has a head for figures, and sits on the boards of three major charity foundations.”

Exactly the sort of woman Steve would expect Tony to date. “She sounds nice.” He told himself that he did not sound wistful.

“She is. She’s also on my shortlist for when Tony needs a society date, because she knows how the game is played. She needs the press, she always needs the press, but especially now.” Pepper stood, heading for the coffee pot. “She’s shopping around a reality series, hoping to be picked up by a major network. She wants to bring in aspiring models from around the world, giving them American exposure.” She poured herself a cup of coffee. “The face of American modeling is a very white one, Steve, and Isabelle wants to have a hand in changing that, to use her fame to make it easier for others.”

“That’s…” Steve fumbled around for the right word. “Commendable.”

Pepper’s shoulder rose and fell in a slight shrug. “She’s also thirty-one. Getting a little long in the tooth to be modeling.”

“Thirty-one is long in the tooth?” Steve asked.

“Modeling is a young woman’s game, and yes, thirty-one makes her quite past her prime,” Pepper said. “And barely old enough for Tony.” She put the pot back into the machine and crossed back to the table. “But she knows how the game is played. She wants her face in the papers, and she wants to be seen by the right people. Tony can help her with that.”

He nodded. “Why are you telling me this?” Steve asked at last.

“Because I pretty much had to put Tony into a headlock to agree to the damn date, and he and Isabelle always have a good time together.” She lowered herself into her chair, moving as if she was tired, as if she’d had too much coffee and too much stress and not nearly enough sleep. “So I’m trying to figure out what’s changed. Because something has changed.”

Steve eyed her coffee. “Maybe you shouldn’t have any more of the sludge that Tony considers coffee,” he suggested, his voice quiet.

“Maybe I shouldn’t handle Tony’s social life anymore,” she said, propping her chin on one fisted hand. But her smile was warmer now, more relaxed, more open. “That’s what’ll end up killing me, not my diet.”

“But the diet’s probably not helping,” Steve pointed out.

She laughed. “Not at all,” she admitted. She held the cup out, and Steve took it. “What happened?” she asked, as Steve took a sip. Steve looked up, and she folded her arms on the table. “Did you two fight?”

Steve looked down at the coffee. “No,” he said, and before she could ask another question, he added, “We had a weekend fling.” His shoulders rose and fell in a slight shrug. “It’s over now. We’re…” He set the coffee cup down, and regretted it. He didn’t want the coffee, but he wanted something to hold onto. “We’re adjusting.”

There was nothing but silence, and he looked up. Pepper was staring at him, her mouth hanging open just a bit. “Tony,” she said, very carefully, “had a weekend fling. With…” Her head tipped to the side, her eyes narrowing. “You. He had a weekend fling with you.”

“Yes,” Steve said, and her mouth pursed. He straightened up. “It’s fine.”

Her eyebrows arched. “It is?”

Steve nodded. “I knew what I was getting into.” He smiled, and this time, it didn’t feel forced or weird. “I mean, I knew that it wasn’t going to be-” His face felt hot, and Steve huffed out a breath. “Look, we’re both adults, right? We had a good weekend. Now it’s over.” He stood up, snagging the cup and heading to the sink, mostly to avoid her eyes. “Now it’s back to real life, and we just have to figure real life out again.”

Behind him, Pepper was silent for a moment. “Steve?” Steve glanced back at her. “Did Tony call this a weekend fling?”

“No,” Steve said. He leaned back against the counter, his hands braced on either side of his hips. “But that’s what he does, right? He finds someone he likes, and he goes away with them for a few days, and they have a good time, and then-” His eyes closed, and he tried not to think about any of it. About Tony’s hands and mouth and the smell of his skin beneath expensive soap and aftershave, the texture of his hair between Steve’s fingers. About the way Tony’s eyes lit up when he was laughing, the way they were dark and smokey and warm when he was just waking up.

The way he honestly and truly seemed to have enjoyed Steve’s company, and Steve’s fumbling attempts at seduction. The way he seemed to have enjoyed Steve, period and full stop.

Steve took a deep breath. “And then, they go back to being friends.” He waved a hand towards her. “Like this Isabelle. They’re… Friends, aren’t they?” It sounded wistful, strangely melancholy, and he tried again. “It’s just taking longer for us.”

Pepper reached for the water bottle he’d abandoned on the table. “I see,” she said. She took a quick sip from his bottle. “So, did you tell Tony you knew it was a weekend fling?”

“More or less. I didn’t want him to think I had-” Steve crossed his arms over his chest, trying to find the right word. “Expectations.”

“Oh, I understand, communication is good, it’s just that the two of you are almost stunningly bad at it,” Pepper said, sounding like she was talking more to herself than to Steve.

“We’re not that bad.” It was a weak protest at best, and Pepper gave him a look. “Okay, we’re not that good, either.”

“You’re pathetic, Cap,” Pepper corrected. She set the water bottle aside, but ran one fingertip idly around the mouth. “Steve, honest question time.” Her eyes slanted up to meet his. “Did you want it to end, when the weekend did?”

Steve’s head fell forward, and he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I don’t-” He glanced up. “Does it matter? He doesn’t.” His head jerked towards the door, then back. “He’s been… Tense with me since we got back. He barely talks to me, he avoids me most of the time, and when I try to talk to him, he looks at me like I’ve got two heads.” He sucked in a breath, and it hurt. “I thought maybe he’d wanna spar yesterday, we used to do that all the time. And now…” He shrugged. “I thought for a second he was going to laugh in my face.”

He gave Pepper a tight smile. “At this point, I’d just be happy to get my friend back.” His shoulders slumped. “He promised me we’d still be friends.” The words were strangely sad, tinged with a sort of hurt confusion that he refused to acknowledge. “Guess I gotta give him time, huh? You and he are friends now. So-”

Pepper was staring at him, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. “Yes,” she said, her voice careful. “We are.”

“Not that I’m saying that what he and I had has anything in common with what you and he had,” Steve rushed out. “I know, completely different circumstances.”

“Oh, yes, completely,” she agreed.

“So I thought, give him some space, and stop, you know, forgetting that he doesn’t want to be touched around the others, or, really, at all,” Steve said, and he honestly didn’t know what he was saying anymore. He pulled himself to a stop. “I should just give him time. Right?”

“I agree.” She leaned forward. “Steve, would you like to be my date for a rather formal, extremely boring social gathering?”

Steve stared at her, not quite sure what to do with that. “I’m sorry?” he asked.

She smiled, bright and easy. “I’ve got Tony all squared away,” she pointed out. “I haven’t called Isabelle yet, but I’m confident she’ll be on board. However, that leaves me very little time to find my own escort.” Her smile stretched. “Will you do me the honors?”

He gaped at her, his face heating. “I… I guess I could,” he said. “But you have to have someone more suitable, Pepper.”

She waved a hand through the air. “I’d say you’re just perfect,” she said. She stood. “Steve. Assume that Tony did want a relationship with you-”

“He doesn’t-"

“Play along, Rogers, I’m working a concept here.” She braced her hands on the table, leaning forward. “Assume he does. Would you want one with him? The sort I had with him? A real, long term, out in public relationship?”

“Yes,” he said, the word coming with a force that surprised him. But it didn’t seem to surprise her.

“Well, then, I think you should get used to the spotlight before you try to work around to that, don’t you?” she asked. “After all, what I get is a fraction of what Tony gets. If you’re uncomfortable on the red carpet with me, if it turns out that you hate that kind of publicity, that kind of attention, then it’d be better if you do just let this become a friendship.”

Her head tipped to the side. “Don’t you think?”

There was something wrong with this logic, Steve was sure of it, but some part of him wanted things he shouldn’t want. “Yes,” he said at last. “But I’m not sure-”

Pepper pushed herself up, clapping her hands together. “I could really use your help, Steve. If you’re worried about Tony, don’t. I’ll let him know what’s happening, all you have to do is show up in a nice suit.”

“I can comb my hair, too,” Steve said, trying for humor, and she grinned.

“I don’t know, you look pretty damn good ruffled up.” She started to gather her things. “Seriously, Steve. There’s nothing to it. Tony and Isabelle will take up the worst of it, you’re just along to make sure I don’t look like a pathetic old spinster who can’t get a date.”

“Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you?” he asked.

“My schtick is aimed at Tony, I’ll remember to tone it back for you,” Pepper said, patting him lightly on the cheek as she passed. “Thank you, Steve, I’ll send you the details, wear a tux!”

“Wait, a-” He started, but she was gone, and he wondered if he’d just made a very large mistake.

He also wondered if he cared.

*

When Pepper met them at the limo with Steve in a tuxedo on her arm, Tony nearly swallowed his tongue.

He didn't, of course, because he was suave and a grown adult and a hundred percent capable of handling this, even if the look in Pepper's eye told him more or less immediately that she was doing this to tweak him. Fair enough, really; he knew he'd been a dick all week, but he didn't seem capable of stopping it.

And true to form, the first words he heard himself say were, "Finally found someone tall enough to match you in heels?"

Isabelle elbowed him gently. Steve just looked sad.

Pepper leaned over, air-kissed his cheek, and said, "I couldn't let you have all the fun," in his ear, while Tony tried not to stare at the way a fitted tuxedo flattered Steve's lines. "Be nice," she added more loudly, smoothing his lapels down. "I needed a date, and given that I spent all my time finding Isabelle for you this week..."

"If I'd known you were desperate, Tony, I would have offered sooner," Isabelle added with a small smirk.

"You're both cruel," Tony announced, as Happy opened the limo door for them. Tony, suspicious of what was going on here, waited until the others had climbed inside and then followed, wondering if it was socially acceptable to fix himself a drink on the ten-minute ride to the hotel. He doubted anyone would say anything, but he had to admit he'd probably passed the age where pre-partying a charity gala was cool.

Pepper was arm-in-arm with Steve on the back bench of the limo, so Tony took one of the sides with Isabelle and made determined small talk. It was good to catch up, anyhow; he liked her, and if this new reality show idea she was shopping around eventually had heavy Stark advertising purchases, well, he'd spent more money on less useful things in the past.

Tropical islands, for one.

But he knew Pepper, and he knew her traps took a while to spring, so he kept one eye on her as they pulled up to the hotel. He could almost see it happen: very naturally, she got out of the limo, leaned back in to offer her hand to Isabelle, and then as Tony followed Isabelle out, she patted him on the chest, which neatly stopped him from moving forward to join his date.

"Isabelle and I have a lot to talk about if she's going to shop the show with a StarkPhone sponsorship," she said, smiling. "Have a good time tonight," she added to Steve, who was struggling out of the limo behind them; Tony turned to catch his fleeting look of confusion, then of panic when Pepper and Isabelle strolled their way down the red carpet, arm in arm, smiling for the papps.

He probably deserved this.

Either way, one of them had to keep from panicking, and resigned acceptance was his specialty when it came to Pepper.

"What just happened?" Steve asked forlornly.

"Your date abducted mine," Tony said.

"Oh," Steve said, still looking confused. "What happens now?"

"Red carpet," Tony said grimly. "Whatever happens, stay with me, and don't stop walking."

He gave the assembled photographers one wide, self-deprecating smile before starting to walk, turning to Steve to make sure he was keeping up. "Keep talking to me. It prevents us from making eye contact with any of them."

Steve muttered something that sounded like *now you want to make eye contact* but he nodded and obediently looked away from the cameras. "Like what?"

"Who did your tux? I didn't think you bought clothes that weren't off-the-rack. I thought it was a principle thing."

"Pepper sent me her stylist. He did a buncha stuff. Spent a whole afternoon getting my measurements, then someone just appeared with the monkey suit this afternoon. They did my hair, too," Steve added, sounding rueful.

"Don't like it?" Tony asked. It looked good on him; ruffled but not disorderly -- more modern than Steve normally went, but not perilously so.

"I don't like whatever they put in it," Steve said, wrinkling his nose.

"Didn't you used to use Brylcreem?" Tony asked. "Wasn't that made of whale fat or something?"

"No, I was a Dapper Dan man," Steve said.

"Was that a joke?"

"You think I used to put whale fat in my hair, you're fair game tonight," Steve said, with what looked like his first real smile all week.

Okay, well, maybe they could do this. Maybe they could be friends. At least while surrounded by cameras.

Then they hit the wall of tabloid journalists, and over Steve's complaint about synthetic Brylcreem Tony heard the shouted questions.

Tony, are you attending the gala with Steve Rogers?

*Tony, are you attending the gala **with** Steve Rogers?*

"Ignore them, we'll be past them soon," he said, as someone yelled, *Is this to distance yourself from your most recent sex tape?* and on the heels of it, *Hey Cap, what do you think of the sex tape?*

A muscle jumped in Steve's jaw. "I'm gonna have to go punch some guys," he said, and actually seemed to be turning towards the source of the shouting. Tony caught him by the lapel and tugged him back.

"No punching, doesn't solve anything," Tony said, shifting his grip to Steve's arm to urge him along. "I tried it once, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I was a little drunk, I punched him right in the camera. Turns out that's not a bad technique; breaks the camera *and* gives the guy behind it a black eye. Dad had to pay out on

that one, though."

"How old were you?" Steve asked, the clamor finally dying down behind them.

"Sixteen," Tony said, as they climbed a handful of stairs into the foyer. He gave the bouncer checking invitations a wave, pointed to his goatee, got a grin and a nod, and led Steve onwards. "I was making awesome life choices, I know."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Steve said, following the curve of the red carpet towards the ballroom. The corridor to it was nearly empty, and he paused to adjust his tie, which did not need adjusting.

"Were you not listening? It didn't happen to me, I happened to it," Tony said with a grin, batting his hands away. "Leave it alone, you look fine, you look amazing."

"Thanks," Steve said, looking both amazing *and* awkward. "So...when we go in, should I go find Pepper?"

"She'll block you if you do, she's got some kind of plot brewing with Isabelle. Don't worry, though, you won't be lacking for companionship," Tony said, clapping him on the arm.

"Strangers," Steve said broodily.

"Friends you haven't met yet!" Tony replied with a grimacing grin. Steve grinned back, momentarily. "Come on. A few hours eating tasty snacks and drinking mid-range wine is not the most painful thing either of us has done."

He guided Steve into the ballroom with a hand on the small of his back, and stayed there just long enough to note several of the younger society set pointedly heading in their direction before he slipped away and left Steve, however unwillingly, to his admirers.

***

Steve had never had much luck when it came to romantic relationships, he was honest enough to admit that. Still, even for him, getting ditched twice in one night seemed to be a bit much. Steve buried his face behind his champagne glass, concentrating on not putting his fist through the wall. Or bursting into tears.

At this point, he really wasn't sure which of the two would be more embarrassing.

"Another glass, Captain?"

Steve's head came up, meeting the eyes of the lovely and charming young lady to his right. "What?" he managed, before her question sank in. "Oh, another glass of champagne, you mean?" He considered his mostly empty flute, and gave her a wry smile. "No, thank you. I've never had much of a taste for the stuff."

She smiled, showing off a charming dimple in her left cheek. "It does tickle the nose."

“And not much else,” the lanky brunette next to her said, her red lips curling up in a wicked smile. She gave Steve a sloe-eyed look, long lashes dipping low. “If you’d like something stronger, Cap, there’s a bar just off to the side there.”

“No, thank you, I don’t-” Still, he looked over, following the languid gesture of her hand. The crowd parted, just for a moment, and through the throng of well-dressed revelers, he spotted the sleek, well-appointed bar.

And the very familiar form lounging against the dark wood.

He took a second, just a second, to admire the sight of Tony, lean and elegant in his perfectly tailored tux. It skimmed the lines of his body, accentuating the breadth of his shoulders and the narrow width of his hips. As Steve watched, Tony brought his glass to his lips, his eyelashes dipping low as he sipped his martini.

Steve sucked in a breath, trying not to remember how those lips had tasted.

And then he spotted the man standing a bit too close to Tony, his expression distinctly smug and even more distinctly distasteful. Tony, for his part, looked somewhere between amused and bored, but Steve felt his hackles rise. He wasn’t jealous, that was ridiculous. He wasn’t jealous, he was just a little protective.

“Actually, that sounds like a wonderful idea,” Steve said, his voice a bit too bright. “If you will excuse me, I think I’ll go get something a bit less…” He paused, and gave them a smile. “Bubbly.” He gave the women a quick nod. “It was very nice meeting you all.”

Not giving any of them a chance to object, he took off across the room at a speed that he could convince himself was still dignified. He discarded the champagne flute on the tray of a passing waiter and managed to slow his steps a bit as he approached the bar. Tony glanced up as Steve cut through the crowd, and for the first time, his mouth turned down, getting tight and unhappy. Steve’s stomach dropped, but the man next to Tony eyed him up and down.

“And who have we here?” he asked. There was a smug, self-satisfied note to his voice that Steve didn’t like. And definitely didn’t trust.

“Steve Rogers,” he said, giving the man a nod and offering his hand.

The man took it, and tried to overpower the handshake. Steve let him, because his attention was back on Tony. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?” the man asked Tony.

Tony waved a hand at the other man. “Steve, this is Barnard Stone. He’s the proud owner of the website that just made its yearly projections in two days by faking a sex tape of me.”

Steve stopped. “Oh,” he said.

Barnard laughed, hard and mocking. “Tony, Tony, Tony,” he said, clapping a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “We didn’t fake anything. We got tricked, and a shame it was, too.” He made a sad sort of face. “I paid a lot of money for that footage.”

Tony arched an eyebrow. “Tell me you’re not angling for an apology,” he said.

“Of course not,” Barnard said, magnanimous about it. He patted Tony’s shoulder again. Tony didn’t seem to notice. “Just saying, you’re not the only victim here.”

Steve stared at Tony. Tony raised a shoulder, a half shrug. “You’re bearing up nobly,” he said.

“It’s a living. You win some, you lose some.”

Steve gave him a wide eyed look. “Sex tape?”

Barnard gave him a pitying look. “It’s a thing adults do now,” he said.

“Gosh, I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Steve said, with an innocent sort of smile. Behind Barnard’s back, Tony’s eyes narrowed, his glass stilling halfway to his mouth. Steve ignored him, doing his best to keep a straight face.

“Aw, are we shocking your sensibilities, Captain America?” Barnard asked, giving the words a cynical twist.

Steve dipped his head forward, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck, “Well, I guess, I mean-” He huffed out a breath. “In my day we didn’t talk about things like that publicly, that’s all.” He paused, one beat, then two, long enough for Barnard to take the bait.

He did, because his kind always did. “You kept your porno behind closed doors?” he asked, tossing back his scotch.

“Back alleys, mostly,” Steve said. Tony was leaning back now, grinning wide and bright. Steve ignored him. “I mean, people using a famous face to sell their porn is nothing new.” Steve leaned in, keeping his voice low and sincere. “I did it, too.”

Barnard choked on his drink. Tony’s eyes were huge, his mouth hanging open.

Steve threw an arm around Barnard’s shoulders. “I was an art student during the great depression, after all,” he said. “Hard to make a living, but people always have money for porn, don’t they?” Steve shook his head. “No matter how hard times get, well-” He paused, and gave Barnard a wide-eyed look, as sincere as he could manage without bursting into laughter. “People still get hard.”

Barnard was still coughing, his face bright red now. “What- What are you talking about?” he managed.

“Tijuana bibles,” Steve said. He stopped, his nose wrinkling. “Though I didn’t call ‘em that, back then. Eight pagers, cause that’s how long they were. Always thought Tijuana bibles was kinda rude on a couple of different levels, if you’re gonna draw that sort of thing, well, no reason to be racist or sacrilegious about it.”

He let out a sigh. “Lotta people were, but you know, you can sell just as well without it, so why not just show some good, clean, happy sex?” His arm tightened on Barnard’s shoulders, his fingers sinking in, tugging him closer. He dipped his head down, dropping his voice. “Cunnalingus, that was my speciality, because a lotta fellas wouldn’t draw that, they thought

it was dirty, but I figured, you know-" He stared at Barnard. "Lotta girls out there'd thank me."

Barnard stared at him, his eyes huge. Tony had clamped a hand over his mouth, struggling to hold himself together. HIs eyes looked damp, like he was trying to hold back tears.

"I mean, Dillinger was a popular topic back then-" Steve said, and Barnard broke.

"It was nice to meet you," he said, in a rush, and then he was heading away from the bar, his steps coming in just under a dead run.

In his wake, Tony broke, bursting into laughter. Steve leaned against the bar next to him. "Hi," he said. "You ditched me for that guy?"

"Oh my God," Tony said, between almost hysterical sounding giggles. "Oh, my God, you are the worst troll. I just-" He buried his face in his hands. "You know that's gonna be all over his website in like fifteen minutes, right?"

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, golly gee, Mr. Stark, you don't think he actually BELIEVED me, did he? Fella that clever and all, I would've thought-"

"Stop, just-" Tony covered his mouth with one hand, and Steve grinned against his palm. "I can't take the Innocent Choir Boy act right now. I just can't."

Steve pushed his hand away. "I was going for Boy Scout, did I overshoot and hit Choir Boy?"

"You missed Boy Scout by a country mile, you damn porn monger." Tony grinned at him and Steve grinned back, pleased. "Seriously. He's going to print that."

Steve shrugged. "Yeah, well, in the wake of him having made up a sex scandal about you, how many people you think are going to believe him?" He picked up Tony's abandoned glass and took a sip. "He's gonna get laughed off the net."

"Still." Tony took the glass back. "Get your own drink, you mooch." But when he took a drink, it was from the same side Steve had used, his lips ghosting over the rim, a strange sort of second hand kiss.

"Nah. I only wanted it because it was yours." Steve pushed himself up. "You okay?"

Tony glanced at him, his brow furrowing. "Am I-" His expression cleared. "That guy? You were worried about THAT guy?" He shook his head. "HE was annoying, Steve, but that's it. Is that why you pulled that whole stunt? Did you-" His smile dropped away. "Did you just paint a target on your back to get him off of mine? You dumbass, that's-"

"I don't like bullies," Steve said, cutting him off. "And I don't like people who make their living by being bullies and then rubbing their victims noses in it, and I really, really don't like people who mess with my friends."

"You're an idiot," Tony said, but there was affection in his voice, in his smile, in his eyes. "Steve Rogers, you are an absolute idiot, you know that, right?"

“Been called worse. By you, actually.” He smiled, and Tony smiled back, and something in Steve relaxed, a rush of relief washing over him. “Don’t ditch me. I get the idea that Pepper did not tell you I was coming, and in my defense, she said she would, but-” His head fell forward. “I only said yes because I thought maybe I’d get to see a little more of you.”

Next to him, Tony was silent, and Steve closed his eyes. “I miss you. A lot.” He took a deep breath, and let it out, the sounds of the party a pleasant rumble in the background. “I had a good weekend, Tony.” He smiled. “Bet a lot of people have said that to you. Nice weekend. I had a good time. Thanks.”

He looked up. “What’re my chances of getting another one? And if it was a one shot, if you’re not-” He made a face. “Not interested in a regular weekend guest, I won’t make a fuss. Just-” He gave Tony a halfhearted smile. “Just don’t ditch me again. I’ve had enough of being left behind.”

Confession must be good for the soul, because he met Tony’s eyes with a grin. “Deal?”

*

Tony Stark found himself in the peculiar position of not knowing what to say. It didn't happen often. Usually he at least saw it coming.

He was conscious of the fact that Steve was leaning over him in what he recognized as a protect-the-civilian stance; he'd seen Steve do it before to people he wanted a private word with. It generally made the rest of the world want to slowly back away. But he was also aware that they were surrounded by people, many of whom knew Tony, all of whom had sharp ears.

"Public," he said, and at Steve's confused blink, "This is public, we should -- discuss this somewhere private. Oh, God, don't make that face," he added, because Steve's confusion had bled out into sadness again. "I'm not trying to let you down easy I just -- this is very public," he repeated, voice so low he could barely hear himself.

It was easier to deal with this than the implications of what Steve had said. Easier to grab Steve's sleeve and haul him subtly away from the bar, off through the row of neoclassical columns that set off the main ballroom from the edges, through one of the many access doors leading to various hallways and kitchens. Tony had spent enough time at enough of these to know how to make a swift and silent getaway. A couple of cater-waiters passed them in the hallway, ignoring them politely, before he found the back entrance to the coat room and dragged Steve inside.

"Hi," he said to the attendant, who looked startled to see a billionaire bursting out of his rack of coats. "I will pay you three hundred dollars to leave this room, close the coat room, and make sure nobody comes in here for the next five minutes."

He could hear Steve's scandalized choking behind him, but the kid looked at him, looked at the cash he held up, and nodded.

"You just knock when you want me to open up again, Mr. Stark," he said, and hopped over the bar dividing the coat room from the entry lobby, pulling a long wooden shutter down to close the room off. Steve emerged from the coats, looking sheepish.

"This coulda waited, huh," he said, not quite meeting Tony's eyes. "I just -- couldn't stand getting ditched one more time tonight."

"No, most of my high drama moments in life have taken place at parties and in awkward locations," Tony said, scrubbing his face with his hands. "An hour and a half into a party, I should just set an alarm, this happens a lot with me. So."

"So," Steve said quietly.

"I was trying to give you space. You gave me the let's-be-friends talk, you backed off, I was...I was working on leveling things out with us," Tony said.

"The let's-be-friends talk?" Steve asked.

"Yes, you said you liked being friends better, and I get that, that's fine," Tony said. "But now you're saying....I don't know, did Captain America just ask to be friends with benefits?"

"What? I'm not Captain America right now," Steve said. "And I didn't -- I just said I enjoyed myself, that wasn't...I thought -- well, you backed off and said you didn't want to go back to the island for a while, I thought maybe you were. Ashamed."

"Of kidnapping you to an island," Tony said dully.

"Of me," Steve replied.

Tony stepped back, almost involuntary. Steve had his hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped.

"In what possible world does that make any kind of sense?" Tony asked, totally perplexed.

"Because I -- I know I'm not behaving the way we're supposed to, I mean, even Pepper noticed I wasn't quite...right, and I'm trying, I really am. I do want it to be like *this*, not like..." Steve gestured at the space between them, "...this."

"Okay, well, now you need more words," Tony said carefully.

"I'm not used to being someone's weekend fling. I didn't know how to react. Especially since I'd like to be your -- your *regular* fling," Steve said.

"And you think I would be ashamed of that?" Tony asked.

"I don't know. I thought maybe. I'm not experienced like you," Steve said miserably.

Tony moved forward again, ducking his head to catch Steve's eye. When that didn't work, he carefully reached out and tipped his chin up a little.

"I am not ashamed of you," he said. "I thought we were on the same page, but clearly not, so -- "

"That's fine, I'll go -- "

"Steve!" Tony put a hand on his chest to stop him. "Holy crap, Captain Low Self-Esteem. Let me finish a sentence."

Steve nodded, waiting.

"I am very bad with relationships, which I assume is why Pepper was forced to intervene. But if you want -- I don't know, something more regular, something possibly taking place in our actual home and not just when we're randomly hiding out on an island -- then let's discuss this. I backed off because I thought you dumped me, not because I wanted to."

"I didn't dump you!"

"Not the point!" Tony said, or tried to say, because about halfway through Steve swooped down like some kind of romance novel hero and caught Tony's head in his hands, kissing him. Tony leaned up into it, hands curling in Steve's shirt. Steve let go of his head and grabbed his hips instead, walking him backwards into the coats and then propping him on a convenient shelf, shoving a handful of suitcases over to make room. Tony's head knocked against the wall as he leaned back, pulling Steve over him, wrapping his legs firmly around Steve's hips.

"I didn't dump you," Steve repeated, pressing his face into Tony's neck, rumpling the starched collar. "I just knew it was ending and I didn't want to lose you completely."

"Well, we're both idiots, thank fuck for Pepper," Tony replied, scrabbling at his tie. He had it half-undone when the shutter nearby rattled.

"Mr. Stark?" the kid called. "Do you need another few minutes?"

"I will write him a ten thousand dollar check to close the coat room for the night," Tony said fervently, but Steve bent his head over Tony's shoulder and laughed. "You think I won't, but I will pay him a lot of money to stand guard while we have uncomfortable coat room sex on a shelf -- "

"Tony," Steve said. "It's a hotel. They have rooms. With beds, even. Probably cheaper than ten grand."

There was a moment of silence.

"I take it back," Tony said, looking up at him. "You're a genius."

Chapter End Notes

Note from Sci: Hey, so Tijuana Bibles, also known as eight pagers, were a real thing! Just as a warning, if you get curious and want to look up more about them, a lot of them are very, very offensive. Since they were unregulated and unedited, a lot of them were full of racism, sexism, and a lot of other very offensive -isms! Some were just little porn comics where the bored housewife has sex with the travelling vacuum cleaner salesman and everyone has a great time, but man, some of them ARE NOT. Some people got issues. Keep your safe search on, okay?

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was an idiot.

All Steve wanted to do was to curl against Tony, around Tony, to lose himself in Tony's strong, hot body and his wicked mouth. Instead, he dragged his body away, inch by painful inch. He didn't want to, but the promise of a bed and Tony was enough to make it the whole thing worth it.

"Okay," he said, his breathing coming in uneven pants. "Okay. Wait here."

"What, wait, what?" Tony asked. "No. No waiting, that's- That's just stupid, Steve. You're stupid."

Steve was laughing as he risked one more kiss. Just one. To steal Tony's words, and his breath, and a last, lingering touch. The kiss went on, and on, until the shutter rattled again. Steve pulled away, just an inch, or even less, close enough that he could feel Tony's ragged breathing on his lips. "Wait here," he whispered. "I'm going to go get us a room."

Tony laughed. "You're going to get us a room?"

"Yes, I'm going to get us a room." Steve rested his forehead against Tony's, his arms tightening. Tony's hips jerked against his, and Steve's breath let him in a high soft whine. "You're not making this easy."

"I like it hard," Tony said, against the line of Steve's jaw, his lips hot on the hollow of Steve's throat. "Little rough, too, just so you know, I do like-"

"Room," Steve said, struggling to focus. "I will get us a room." He pulled away, and it hurt, there was physical pain involved with wrenching free of Tony's heat. "Because if you do it, it'll be gossip before you make it to the elevators."

Tony's head fell back, his body flexing as he sucked in a breath. "If you do it, they'll assume there's a legitimate reason," he said. "Like national defense or world peace. Right." He looked up, his dark eyes nearly black, his mouth swollen, his face flushed, and Steve was dizzy, just looking at him. "I'll meet you at the elevators."

"Right," Steve said, with a sharp nod. It served to get some of his brain functioning again. He took a step back, and another, and Tony didn't move. Steve sucked in a breath. "Right," he repeated. "Don't break up with me before then."

Tony's mouth dropped open. "Me? You're telling ME not to-"

Grinning, Steve slipped out the door before he could get caught having sex in a coat room. He assumed that tomorrow, he'd regret that.

Right now, he could not imagine why.

The lobby was almost empty, most of the press and guests on the other side of the hotel at the ballroom. A few guests loitered here and there, and a bellhop was stationed by the front doors, but no one gave him a second glance. Steve headed straight through, grateful for it.

There was only one employee behind the check in desk, a short young woman with bouncing, jet black curls and a round face. She gave Steve a cheerful smile, and Steve tugged his jacket down over his hips. Luckily, it was a short trip to the desk, and it was a high counter.

"Good evening," she said. "How can I help you, sir?"

Steve gave her a smile. "Hi," he said, giving her a nod. "I wondered if you might have a room available?"

She grinned. "For you, I think we can scrape something up." She glanced down at her computer. "Do you need a suite, sir? Most of our larger suites are booked, but I think I can find you something on one of the lower floors if you need-"

"No, I just-" He leaned over. "Need a place away from the crowds for a while." He gave her a slight smile. "These kind of events are kind of a bit much. And when it's done, I'd like to crash for the night."

"Oh, I understand," she said, smiling back. "There's a reason why they leave me out here at the front desk during these charity events; I am not good at dealing with them, and right now?" Her smile stretched. "No one's checking in or out."

Steve couldn't help but smile back. "No one but me."

"No one but you," she agreed, her head down over her work again. "I'm going to need a photo ID and a major credit card." Her eyes darted up, full of humor. "Sorry, we don't take press clippings."

"That seems unfair," Steve said, trying for a straight face. He reached for his wallet. "I feel like I should be asking you for a veteran's discount."

She laughed, high and bright. "I'll see what I can do to get you a good rate." She took his license and credit card from him. "One moment, please." Her head down, she went to work. "Do you want a particular view?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Tony pace by the elevator banks, his movements sharp and impatient. Hiding his smile, Steve looked back to the clerk. "No, whatever's available."

"Of course." Her teeth sank into her lower lip, bright white against the gleaming red of her lipstick. "Sorry," she said, her smile dying. "I'm- Give me a second, I'm so sorry."

Perplexed, Steve nodded. "Of course." He watched, feeling awkward and out of place as her fingernails clicked against the computer keys. Every couple of seconds, the computer let out

a sullen, piercing beep, and her face got tighter. Steve cleared his throat. “Is there a problem?”

“No, I-” She reached up, tucking a curl behind her ear. “Well, yes.” She looked up, her eyes huge. “See, the system requires me to input your information before it will allow me to issue you a room key. That’s why we need your license, because we’ve had a problem company wide with underage guests, and so I have to-” She swallowed. “Put in your date of birth.”

Steve stared at her. “Okay.”

She grimaced. “It’s getting rejected. The computer thinks I’m putting it in wrong. Because-”

“Because you don’t get a lot of one hundred year old guests,” Steve said, the problem dawning on him.

“Not many,” she agreed. She stopped. “None, I guess. Because the system won’t take it. And if the system won’t take it, I can’t assign you a room, because I can’t issue a room key.”

Steve picked up his ID. “It really is my date of birth,” he said.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “I’ve been to your Smithsonian exhibit!” She froze, a wash of red crawling up her cheeks. “Oh, my God, did I say that aloud?”

Steve smiled at her, even as he tapped the edge of the ID against the marble countertop of the check in counter. “Don’t worry, I’ve been, too.” He paused. “It’s weirder that I’ve been through it, trust me.”

“It’s a very nice exhibit,” she said.

“It really is,” Steve said, because on some level he was starting to worry that if he didn’t distract her, she’d start crying, and as odd as this conversation had become, it was still far preferable to crying. On either of their parts.

“So I know your license is fine, the computer’s the one who hasn’t been to the Air and Space Museum,” she explained.

“Bet it’s bitter about that, too.” His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out. “What are you DOING?” Tony’s text said.

“I understand, I do, but if there’s anything you can do,” Steve said, even as he texted back, “Discussing my Smithsonian exhibit, what are you doing?”

She sucked in a breath. “Let me get my manager, I’m so sorry, but maybe she has a work around for this, I am so sorry.”

“It’s fine, really, but-”

He heard the sound of very expensive shoes stomping their way across the lobby before Tony appeared next to him. “The Smithsonian?” Tony asked Steve, leaning one elbow on the counter. “Really?”

“It’s a really nice exhibit,” Steve said, and he was trying not to smile, really, he was, but Tony just looked so completely done with the situation, as if museums were the last straw. “Top notch.”

“Oh, Mr. Stark,” the clerk started.

“I know, we helped fund the damn thing, it’s lovely, why are we discussing it?” Tony asked Steve.

The clerk tried again. “Mr. Stark?”

“The computer thinks I have a fake ID,” Steve said. He shrugged. “And I don’t have a copy of my birth certificate on me.”

Tony stared at him. Then at the clerk. She gave him a nervous smile. Tony heaved a sigh that held so much suffering that Steve had to bite his cheek to keep from bursting into laughter. “Really?” Tony asked, even as he reached into his coat. “Really, are we-” He slapped a black AmEx down on the counter. “Give the man a room.”

She blinked at it, then pushed the card back towards him. “Mr. Stark, I don’t-”

“Please be kidding me right now,” Tony said. He folded his arms on the counter, leaning forward, turning the full force of his most charming smile on her. Her pupils dilated, her lips parted. Tony’s head tipped forward, his smile going hot. “Please. Do you need my ID? I… I think I own part of this chain.”

She blinked. “Yes, sir, you do, but I can’t-”

“There’s always the coat closet,” Steve whispered, and Tony tried to stomp on his foot. Steve skipped sideways, staying safely out of reach.

“Why. Why can’t you?” Tony asked.

“Because Ms. Potts had a suite reserved for you already. She had your things sent over this afternoon, she said you would be by for the key when you were ready to turn in,” the girl said. Tony stared at her. She stared back. Tony braced his hands on the counter, his head hanging down. “Mr. Stark?” the clerk asked. “Are you… Are you all right?” She glanced at Steve, her eyes huge. “Does he need to lie down?”

“Probably,” Steve said. “I’ll bring him up, do you have-” She shoved the room key into his hand, and Steve wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Thank you,” Steve told her. “C’mon, Tony, you can lie down for a bit.”

“I will kill her,” Tony said, and Steve steered him towards the elevators. “Worse than that. Steve.” He looked at Steve, his eyes manic. “I am going to fire her, Steve. I am- Let’s go, I’m firing Pepper right now.”

“Well, you can try.” Steve stabbed the elevator button, and hustled Tony inside. “But I’m gonna be honest with you. If she left us lube and condoms, so I don’t have to repeat this whole farce with a drugstore, then I’ll hire her.”

“You can’t afford her.”

“Tony?” Steve shoved the keycard into the slot, and punched the button for the top floor, where their room was waiting. “Neither can you.”

*

As soon as the doors were closed, Tony leaned in for a kiss, but Steve caught him by the shoulder.

"We're a hundred feet from privacy," he said.

"We are *in* privacy," Tony said. "That keycard you just put in to send us to the penthouse? It locks the elevator to other calls."

Steve looked uncertain. "That's not true, is it?"

"My hand to Thor, on my honor as the child of luxury and privilege, when those doors open they're going to open directly into the living room of the suite," Tony said, leaning into him again, and Steve was either too shocked at this new development or much too horny to stop him, which either way worked to Tony's advantage. Tony tugged on his neck and kissed him, body arching up and into Steve's, until the elevator slid smoothly to a stop. Steve lifted his head and his eyes went wide.

"Wow," he said, and Tony turned to see what he was looking at.

It was a pretty great view. There was a nice sunken area for the lounge, complete with a huge television and a fireplace. A hardwood-floored catwalk ran past it to the bedroom, which was glassed in on three sides and looked out on the lights of Manhattan. There was a granite bar attached to the kitchenette, and a set of stairs that Tony was 99% sure led down to another sunken area for the hot tub. Tasteful original art on the walls, nice upholstery on the furniture. Pepper never did do things by halves.

"Well, it's not a private island, but it'll do," Tony said, leading him out of the elevator before it closed and took them back down and the whole night spiralled into an irredeemable joke. "And Pepper sent my...things..." he said, investigating the suitcase on a table near the bed, "...which include a set of pajamas for you and..."

He held up the shaving kit with a grin. Steve took it from him, opening it curiously. A dozen condoms spilled out.

"Maybe she's not fired," Tony allowed. "She seems to have a very high opinion of my stamina."

Steve tossed the remaining item -- the little tube of lubricant -- onto the bed and then set the shaving kit aside, bending to kiss him again.

"I don't plan on needing pajamas," he said, and Tony felt his hands working at the bow tie, the buttons of his shirt. "I'd bet there's a switch that draws the curtains."

"Don't need it," Tony managed, stepping out of his shoes before he tumbled back onto the bed. "The glass is tinted. We see out, nobody sees in."

"Good," Steve said fiercely, and went back to attacking his neck with his mouth.

They probably could have gotten naked significantly faster if they weren't rolling around on the bed, trying to make up for lost time -- at least, Tony was, and he assumed Steve was, to judge from the way he kept trying to pin him down and kiss him. Eventually Tony twisted away, shirtless and laughing, and Steve caught him around the waist, pulling him back onto the bed and rolling them both over.

Tony found himself on his belly, a super-soldier straddling his thighs as his mouth worked its way across his shoulders, down his spine. When Steve got to the dip in the small of his back and exhaled warm air across it, Tony went limp, melting into the blanket. (They were going to utterly ruin this blanket.)

"Behave yourself," Steve said, sliding up to nuzzle the back of his neck.

"Since when have I ever?" Tony replied, rolling his hips up. Steve grunted, hands going to his waist to tug his trousers down. He felt fingertips brush over the smooth skin of his ass, tentative. He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked over his shoulder. Steve had one hand on his hip, the other hovering over his skin, eyes riding up the angle of his spine.

"Can I?" Steve asked, catching his eye.

"Can you what?" Tony inquired, grinning.

Steve flushed. "Can I..." he ran his hand down over Tony's ass again. "You gonna make me say it?"

"The words are, *Tony, I want to top you*," Tony sing-songed. "*Tony, I have a thing for your ass. Tony, I want to* -- "

"Be inside you," Steve blurted. Then he winced.

"Yes, you can, and thank you for asking. But you are gonna spend like, half of tonight prepping first because I've seen you naked, Big Guns -- "

"Tony, don't."

Tony grinned at him briefly before turning back around, sliding his elbows down and drawing one leg up, arching, muscles bunching and extending, showing off. He felt Steve's touch, cool and slick with lubricant now, and sighed long and happy as Steve somewhat tentatively began to stretch him out.

He got lost in it for a while, the alternating pain-pleasure and Steve's quiet exhales, his almost palpable focused concentration. By the time he became aware he was probably ready, he was already undulating against Steve's fingers, hips bumping up off the bed, back bowing.

It sounded like Steve said, "You're so *warm*," but he couldn't be sure; it didn't make a lot of sense. He was warm, but who wouldn't be, with all of that touch and attention focused on him.

"Steve," he whined through his teeth, "I know I said half the night, but I didn't really mean it literally."

"Little longer," Steve said, but Tony heard him moving off the bed, and the soft crunch of him sifting through the spilled condom packets to retrieve one. Then there was a thick pressure against his body and --

"Oh, Jesus," Steve said under his breath. Tony grinned to himself, face buried in one of his arms, and bucked his hips, tilting them back, taking him deeper with a sharp movement. Steve's breath left him in a shocked huff. Steve ran a hand down his spine and then rested his hands on Tony's waist, lightly, more like he was anchoring himself --

"Wait," Steve managed, and then leaned back, pulling away. Tony groaned and rolled his eyes until he felt Steve shove on his hip, a tacit request for him to turn over.

"Oh, better, yes," Tony agreed, rolling onto his back and hooking his heels behind Steve's hips, knees against his ribcage, drawing him in. Steve tumbled over half on-top of him, propping himself on his elbows, and when he pushed in again, careful and slow, he kissed Tony's collarbone, then his neck.

"You looked too beautiful," Steve murmured into his skin. "Couldn't -- I didn't want it to be too fast."

"Your ass fetish is noted," Tony replied, laughing and tipping his head back when Steve made an irritated noise. "Don't be cranky, it's a real mood-killer."

"I'd believe you, but I know you," Steve said, beginning to move in earnest now. "You -- ah! -- you like it when I'm cranky."

"It does amuse," Tony agreed, rolling his body from shoulders to hips. Steve grunted.

"Infuriating, stubborn -- " Steve bit him, not quite breaking the skin, then wrapped his arms around Tony's shoulders and rolled them. Tony flailed for a second before Steve steadied him, and then leaned back, straddling Steve now. In control.

He gave Steve an evil grin, and reached down with one hand to tease his nipple. Steve arched sharply.

"Christ, I'm going to learn every inch of you," Tony said, as Steve bucked. "Every single thing that makes you tick, I'm going to take you apart so I can put you back together again -- "

"Tony!" Steve said, strangled and hoarse.

"It's okay, sweetheart, I know I'm irresistible, you've got a couple in you, let go if you want -- "

Steve tipped his head back, arched, and came on a hiss of breath, fingers digging into Tony's hips. Tony watched his expression, watched him slip from desperation into goofy bliss, and then bucked once, sharply. Steve whimpered.

"Shh, I know," Tony agreed, bending to kiss him, gently disengaging their bodies. Steve rolled to one side, disposing of the condom, then turned back and pulled Tony close, kisses less desperate now but longer, fuzzy and open in the afterglow.

"G'me a minute," Steve slurred into his mouth, hands roaming down his back, up his arms, aimless strange patterns that he didn't seem entirely aware he was making.

"You act like I'm not enjoying what's happening right now," Tony replied, twisting into every touch.

"I want to do right by you," Steve said. "Never wanted to hurt you."

"Let's call it a draw."

"We're good at hurting each other."

"I think, probably, we're good at hurting ourselves," Tony admitted.

"Maybe both," Steve agreed, pulling their bodies flush. Tony could feel the beginnings of an erection against his thigh, and grinned into Steve's cheek.

"What are the odds I could convince you to try sex against a tinted glass wall?" he asked.

"Slim to none," Steve replied. Tony shoved him onto his back again, then slithered off the bed for another condom. Steve reached for it, but he held it out of his grasp.

"Where were we?" he asked, sitting on Steve's thighs, mock-contemplative.

"You makin' fun of me?" Steve asked, one eyebrow tipped up.

"Are you kidding? All this?" Tony rested a hand on Steve's stomach, thumb sweeping across the smooth plane of it. "I'm thrilled. You missed your calling in life as a kept man."

"Mm," Steve answered noncommittally, as Tony put the condom on him. "I'll bear that in mind."

This time was slower, less desperate for Steve and more patient for Tony. The dim reflections of them in the glass echoed back and forth at the edges of Tony's sight, pleasantly feeding his ego; probably for the best that Steve couldn't see them, half-buried in the bed and gratifyingly focused on the one real Tony Stark in the room. It felt like the first time, back on the island, no particular urgency, careful and sweet.

"Gala's still going on," Tony said in Steve's ear, breathless. "They're all down there probably wondering where I went -- where you went -- and I've got you all to myself."

"Greedy," Steve groaned.

"I'm a greedy man," Tony said with a nod, and tried to elaborate on it but couldn't quite, words failing as the rhythm of movement and pleasure took over. He cried out, felt Steve tense under him, and saw stars for a second as orgasm washed over him. Steve pulled him down and rolled over, covering his body and jerking hard against him, half-crushing him into the bed as he came. Tony laughed gleefully and cradled Steve's head in his hands, thrilled.

They lay that way for a long minute, sharing breath, and then Steve rolled away with a muttered apology.

"Nnn," Tony said, waving a hand dismissively. He must have made his indifference to being nearly suffocated clear, because Steve nodded and relaxed, staring upwards, lost in thought.

Tony had barely caught his breath when Steve, still staring up at the ceiling, said, "I want to date you."

"Right now?" Tony asked, faintly alarmed. He really didn't want to put pants on anytime soon.

"Well, sort of....from now until whenever," Steve said, twisting his head to look at him. "I just want us to be clear on this point. I'm trying 'direct'. It's a CEO thing Pepper taught me."

"This is the least direct thing ever to happen to me, and it's mostly her fault."

"Well, she's good at both," Steve allowed, and Tony gave in to temptation and brushed a knuckle up his cheek affectionately.

"She's still fired," he said.

"No she's not."

"You're not the boss of me."

"No, but she is."

"Why are we arguing about Pepper right now?"

"I don't know." Steve considered it. "Possibly we just always have to be arguing about something? You really enjoy arguing."

"*I* really enjoy arguing? Have you heard yourself talk?"

Steve grinned and inched closer, rising up on one elbow to kiss him. "Yes, but the difference is, I'm always right."

"Oh my lord, where do I begin," Tony answered, kissing him back.

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“Don’t think,” Steve said, rolling over, tucking his body in close to Tony’s, “That I haven’t noticed your lack of an actual response to my question.”

Tony stretched, his body flexing with a languid sort of ease. “What question would this be, Cap?” He opened one eye, a wicked smirk curling his lips. “The one about fucking me? I thought you got a pretty emphatic response to that. But if you’re repeating the question, the answer’s still yes, but give a man a few minutes to recover.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but he felt his face heat. “The one about you dating me,” he said, refusing to be distracted. His body wasn’t nearly so single-minded, but he’d been in a constant state of semi-arousal around Tony for what seemed like forever. He could ignore it by this point.

“That didn’t require an answer,” Tony said. “It’s a no brainer. Like, are you having dessert? It’s a courtesy question, because you knew the answer when you asked the question.”

Steve waited. “Trying to infer things from your rambling hasn’t been working out so well for me,” he pointed out, and pushed himself up, bracing his hands on the bed on either side of Tony’s shoulders. “Are we dating?” he asked, his mouth almost touching Tony’s. “Or just having a good time on the occasional weekend?”

“Hmmmm,” Tony said, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips. “The occasional weekend thing’s working out really well for me so far.”

Steve’s eyebrows arched. “Really? It has? Because you have been a real asshole to deal with all week.”

“And Pepper tricked you into sleeping with me, so-”

Laughing, Steve kissed him, muffling his amusement against Tony’s lips. “Stark…”

Tony’s hands were on his back now, on the lines of his hips and the curve of his ass. “I thought we were dating the moment you kissed me back,” he whispered, his smile brilliant. “Didn’t figure you’d be spending the night with me unless we were, well, together.”

Steve buried his face in Tony’s shoulder. “Guess I’m not the sophisticated sort of partner you go for, am I?” he asked, his voice wry. But Tony’s fingers slid up the back of his neck, tangling in his hair, stroking and petting.

“Well, that was before I knew you were a depression-era pornlord,” Tony mused, and Steve choked on a laugh, his lips hot against Tony’s skin. Tony’s breathing went ragged, but it didn’t slow him down. “And can I tell you? That was the best lie I’ve ever heard. That was a lie for the ages. A tall tale for the record books. I didn’t even know you COULD lie like that.”

“Right,” Steve said. “Lie.” He looked up. “Are we dating?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, and what was that all about? That ‘lie’ thing?”

“Can I tell the team?” Steve asked, casting around for his jacket. It was a wadded pile of fabric at the foot of the bed, and he levered himself up, just far enough to make a grab for it.

“Can you tell the team what?” Tony asked. “That you made porn comics?”

“That we’re dating,” Steve said, unruffled.

Tony was staring at him now, his eyes bright, his face set in lines of concentration. It was so adorable that Steve couldn’t resist leaning over and pressing a kiss to his pursed lips. “I need a denial here,” Tony said, as they broke away. “About the ‘making porn comics’ thing.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve said. He found his phone and tossed the jacket. “Sure. Are we telling the team or is this information strictly need to know? Because I understand if you want to keep things quiet, but I’d-”

Tony flopped back against the pillows. “Steve.”

“Tony?”

“It has been pure hell keeping my hands off of your ass for the last few days. And that was after you’d broken up with me.”

Steve paused, his thumbs hovering over his phone keypad, sending a glare in Tony’s direction. “I did not-”

Tony waved him off. “After I thought you’d broken up with me, better?”

“Damn straight,” Steve muttered, squinting down at his phone. But a smile was playing around his mouth, a hint of pleased warmth curling in his stomach. “Wanted to pat my ass, huh?”

“Pat, no. Grab and squeeze, yes.” Tony’s laugh was filthy, and Steve shifted, his body responding to the promise in the sound. “So pretty much, you give me an opening, I’m going to be half awake one morning and end up giving you a hickey in the kitchen.”

“Shocking,” Steve said. “I’m shocked by your lack of self-control.”

“And we all know you shouldn’t be.” Tony’s fingers stroked over the line of Steve’s shoulder, the rough tips of his fingers a pleasant tease. “Just saying, team’s probably going to notice.”

Steve grinned. “Okay.” He went back to his phone, and Tony reached out, pushing it down.

“Steven Grant Rogers,” he said, his eyes narrowed. “You made that whole thing up, didn’t you? About making Tijuana Bibles-”

“Eight pagers,” Steve corrected.

“Fine, eight pagers, tell me you made that up just to fuck with him.”

Steve considered him. “Okay,” he said after a moment, because Tony seemed to be waiting for that response. “I made that up to mess with him.”

Tony’s mouth gaped open, and he pushed himself upright. It did nice things to the muscles of his shoulders and arms, the taut lines of his chest, and Steve just enjoyed the view for a moment. “Are you lying to me now?” Tony asked.

“Sure,” Steve said, watching as Tony’s biceps went tight. Such nice arms. And hands. He shifted, his erection a familiar, constant ache now.

“Steve.”

“Tony,” Steve said, stifling a smile. He met Tony’s eyes, and Tony stared at him.

“You didn’t,” Tony said, and Steve shrugged. “No. There is no way… That you would… YOU. You didn’t have the experience necessary, did you? I mean, no judging here, really, I’m not judging, but I’m not getting a vibe of long sexual history.”

“Pretty much no sexual history,” Steve admitted, because he’d never really thought of that as shameful. Tony didn’t seem to be inclined to mock, so that was nice, too. “Why does that matter?”

“How could you possibly draw porn if you-”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Might come as a shock to you, Tony, but ‘experience’ wasn’t really a necessity. I had a bit of book learning and the ability to draw a halfway decent dick, that was pretty much all you needed, back then.” He went back to his phone. “Not rocket science. The guys who bought that sorta thing probably didn’t have much more experience than I did, so what would they know about it being wrong?”

“Oh, my God.” Tony’s mouth was hanging open. “I really cannot tell if you’re fucking with me or not right now.”

“No, I’m done fucking with you for the moment, but I'm guessing by the size of that overnight bag that Pepper booked the room for the whole weekend, so give me a little more time, and I’ll-” That was as far as Steve got before Tony was kissing him, hot and hard and full of need. He went down in a tangle of sheets and limbs, dragging Tony along with him.

It was a long time before they came up for air again, and by then, they were both panting. “I need… To call some porn collectors,” Tony said, his face flushed, his pupils dilated. “Oh, God, I really do not know if you’re trolling me or not, but the POSSIBILITY that you did porn comics…” He rolled away from Steve, sprawling out on the pillows. “I will give you a million dollars to do an Iron Man porn comic.”

Steve found his phone. “Thanks, but the economic situation’s looking up, don’t think I need to take on that kind of work anymore.” Grinning, he wrapped an arm around Tony, dragging him in. “Say cheese.”

Tony smiled, a reflex action, as Steve took a selfie. “Did you do porn?”

“No,” Steve said with a straight face.

“I can’t believe you did.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve mumbled. He checked the photo, nothing indecent was showing. Just the two of them, tangled together in the sheets, his face flushed and his hair falling over his forehead, and Tony with a wicked smile and sleepy eyes. It wasn’t exactly porn, but it didn’t leave much doubt as to what they were doing.

“I honestly cannot figure out where your lies begin and where the ‘gosh golly gee whiz’ fakery ends,” Tony said.

“You’re assuming that’s not a lie, that’s your first mistake.” He pulled up Clint’s last text to him, eyeing the “Congrats on being Tony’s newest conquest!” message for a moment. Then, with a grin, he sent the photo, captioned. “Thanks, it’s working out pretty well for me. See you all in a few days.”

He turned off his phone and tossed it aside. He had better things to worry about.

Chapter End Notes

And that's all folks!

Thanks for coming along on "two fanfic writers scream at each other over google docs and find the best/worst way to screw over their characters!" We blame puns.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!